

Reflection on the graduation project
Heritage and Architecture studio 2022-2023
Adapting 20th century heritage
Elles Warrenaar || 4449363

The graduation studio and project

De studio, adapting 20th century heritage, is part of the graduation studio Heritage & Architecture. The studio focusses on the Modern Mall. The modern mall makes an interesting topic for this studio, since it is perceived as 20th century heritage; meaning that it is not officially heritage yet. However, these malls play a big role in our urban structures and also in people's daily lives. Within the studio we researched the revitalization of the mall, the project included historical research, research intervention methods, scenarios and new programs and creating a redesign for the mall in its urban context. The modern mall, as researched in the studio, rose mostly in suburban neighborhoods, in the period after the second world war. These neighborhoods often lacked facilities, the mall was supposed to fulfill this void. Therefore, from the early days of the shopping mall, there has always been a focus on the non-commercial aspect of the mall. The mall was merely only a place to shop; it functioned as a center for cultural enrichment, education and relaxation, it formed its own social space. Today, however these malls face several problems. Retail vacancies are rising, while shoppers continue to stay away. The most important reason for this would be that people do not need to go to the store anymore to buy something. Shopping is faster, easier and more convenient online. Another cause could be that the shopping center, for several years now, consist primarily of a collection of stores. Occasionally a restaurant or entertainment is added somewhere, but the primarily function has always been to shop and buy. However, shopping cannot be the only thing to do anymore. Precisely the mix of functions in a shopping center will lead to a lively urban center. For this graduation project, the modern mall Amsterdamse Poort was first researched and then redesigned. Amsterdamse Poort (1986) is located in Amsterdam Southeast, in the middle of the Bijmer. Even before Amsterdamse Poort was designed, the Bijlmer already had a complicated cultural and social background. Amsterdamse Poort is a problematic area with a stark contrast between a social communal function during the day and many unsafety and drug trafficking at night. A historical research approach is used to better understand what has happened in this shopping mall, and how these interventions influenced the social value of the mall. This research thus forms the basis for a number of recommendations that were subsequently implemented in a redesign for Amsterdamse Poort.

Personal fascination and interest

How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

My research actually started mainly out of personal fascination. After a first visit to Amsterdamse Poort, I was immediately inspired by the special atmosphere the area possessed. I felt like a kind of intruder in a, at first glance, well-functioning society. I wanted to explore this special social value that the area possessed. I did not have a lot of background knowledge about the Bijlmer; besides the commonly known problems, I lacked information. I therefore decided to first delve into the broader social-cultural context of the Bijlmermeer. After seeing several photos of the empty polder, which will be totally filled with high-rise flats within 30 years, I was convinced that this was going to be my research case.

My research changed quite a bit during the year. From the start, the focus was on the social value of the shopping centre. I experienced the social value directly when visiting Amsterdamse Poort, I wanted my design to look for a way to strengthen this social value. Initially, the focus was mainly on the difference between formal and informal interventions, I felt that informal interventions showed what users were missing in the area and that this might give me insight into where I could intervene. During my research, it became increasingly clear that I was really trying to gain insight into what had actually happened in the area, and how that affected its social value. My focus therefore shifted to the analysis of different time periods ($t = -1$, $t = 0$, $t = +1$), in order to better understand the changing social value. As a result, the research became primarily a historical case-specific study where the conclusion consisted of a recommendation for my design. As mentioned, my research was focused on strengthening the social value of the shopping centre, from different theories it became clear that to strengthen this value, the

level of place attachment needed to be strengthened. To investigate place attachment, I used a theory that describes this through various architectural attributes. I examined these attributes in different time periods to conclude that accessibility, diversity, memory and safety were the most important aspects to focus on in my design.

Therefore, the conclusions from my research constituted more of a recommendation for my design than an actual interaction between research and design. In retrospect, I think there could have been more interaction between my research and design if I had focused on other research cases in my research. Now my research was entirely focused on Amsterdamse Poort, which certainly gave me depth within my research and a good insight into how the area developed and how these developments could influence my new design. However, there was no comparison material. I think the relationship between research and design would have been better with multiple research cases. If I had had another research case, I would have been able to compare the application of the attributes (accessibility, diversity, memory and safety) with other cases, perhaps I could have drawn inspiration for my project from these other cases and there would have been more interaction between research and design.

Research method

How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

To find an answer to my main research question, I divided the research into four different parts. These different parts tackle the used theory and the different time periods, that I wanted to compare in my research. These parts together should compose a complete picture of the changed social value of the shopping mall, making it a historical research approach. Based on what I also described above, in retrospect I might use a different approach. In retrospect, I think the research method is interesting but the results of my research are mostly case-specific. The method I used in my research is to compare different time periods, within these periods I used different research materials, such as archive drawings, historical photos, historical news articles, photos on instagram and flickr, google reviews and observations. I think using these different sources was very helpful, it gave me a good overview from different sources that I could use comparatively side by side. However, the results remain case-specific. In hindsight, it might have been interesting to examine several cases to compare the results. From this comparison, I could then have seen whether there is some kind of general trend or whether the results differ from case to case. This comparative research would also have been more relevant to get more relationship between my research and design. Now my research is mainly a recommendation for my design. Whereas otherwise I could have switched back and forth more to see how certain attributes are represented in other cases.

Design method

As described, my research mainly formed a basis for my design. I therefore started my design phase with the four researched principles; accessibility, diversity, safety and memory. I tried to work on these four principles at different scales. First of all, I started with a master plan for the entire area in which I tried to incorporate these different aspects. For instance, for accessibility I looked at transforming the surrounding road profiles to make the area more bicycle and pedestrian friendly. In addition, for safety, for example, I addressed the parking decks and argued that more residential entrances should be made on the ground floor to increase social control. After this master plan, I started focusing on one part of the area, cluster 7. To me, cluster 7 formed a good location, all the stated problems were present and there was enough space to implement my ambitions. In this cluster, I tried to apply the four principles at all scale levels, from, for example, diversity in the form of functions, to safety in the detail in the form of designing a light element. As a result, in this design process I have been working on different scale levels each time.

'Designing in between different scale levels' ('Ontwerpen door de schalen heen') is something I often heard during the years of studying architecture. Yet I think, only during this past year I realized what this actually means. Never before have I designed at so many different scales and also switched between these scales. Nothing is finished until the last moment, because a small change in detail can then create a

different façade image, which in its turn creates a different floor plan. This has also frustrated me at times, especially now in the final weeks before p4, because until the last minute, there is little I can cross off my to-do list. But it has certainly also taught me a lot. Before, I would simply draw a facade that matched my floor plan and a detail that matched my facade, one by one you could then cross it off your list. This graduation year, however, things were completely different, but because of this I do feel that I learned a lot and also gained a better understanding of how things work in practice. In this, building technology has also been a big part of my design. How an existing structure is put together, what you can do with it, how you can transform/add to it, in what order things are built, how certain connections are made, all these aspects have come along in the past year and I feel that I have learned so much about these topics. I feel that I have a better understanding of how to make something, also I feel that for the first-time details are no longer an unsolved mystery to me. I feel like I understand what I have drawn and that the detail actually matches my principles. I think this is mainly due to the early integration of building technology within the design process. Because you are working from the very beginning to understand what is there and what you can do with it, I feel that technology has become a much more integrated part of your design.

With that said, I think the studio set-up has been hugely valuable. The initial research into intervention methods, the large-scale group research, designing a master plan, zooming in on a building and designing this building in detail have been a continuous and integral process in which we (as a group), to my mind, were guided in the right direction at the right moments each time. This has, to my mind, led to an integral design in which I have tried to implement my principles at every scale.

Can you ever really understand the context?

How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

In social terms, this graduation project is interesting because in recent years a trend has emerged in which basic amenities increasingly disappear or become less accessible in suburban neighbourhoods. While precisely in fragile neighbourhoods, like the Bijlmermeer, these facilities are desperately needed for the vitality of the community and future prospects of the individual. Libraries, community centres, schools, convenience stores, neighbourhood cops, health care facilities, neighbourhood theatres and other small-scale cultural facilities are becoming increasingly scarce in the less affluent parts of the city. The social safety net is eroding. Therefore, my project focuses on the social value of the mall for the community. Which functions and which architectural elements can contribute to the sense of social safety? How can the sense of place attachment be strengthened creating a strong community feeling?

In professional terms, this graduation project can function as an inspiration for the future. Building from the post-war period in the Netherlands are often not recognized as heritage. The most recognizable form of heritage are monuments, these are often considered heritage because they are of great architectural or archaeological value to society. In the past, this often happened when well-known architects designed buildings or when a building was extraordinary for a particular architectural movement. However, nowadays more and more attention is paid to everyday architecture. Also regarding buildings from the post-war period, a fair amount of our living environment was built after the war; homes, offices, shopping centres, churches, recreational areas, schools, art in public spaces et cetera. It is intertwined with our history and defines our personal and communal identity. However, the buildings and complexes from this period now require renovation, adaptation and preservation, so does the shopping mall. Many Dutch suburbs have a shopping centre like Amsterdamse Poort; a shopping centre consisting of the combination of housing and shops, which is often largely used only during the day and where there is vacancy. My graduation project is seeking for a redesign where the social value of the shopping centre is reinforced for the surrounding community. This project can serve as an inspiration for other projects in the Netherlands.

Throughout the year, I have often thought about the ethical aspects of my project. From the beginning of the project, I have certainly been aware of the complicated neighbourhood in which my project is located. The Bijlmer has a complicated social-cultural history. Throughout my research, I tried to understand this

context as much as possible. For example, in addition to analysing the neighbourhood, I watched several interviews, podcast and read two books that focus specifically on the history of this neighbourhood. Yet throughout the year, the question 'can you, as a designer, ever completely understand the context' always lingered. To be honest, after a year of research and design, I still don't have an answer to this question. I think that, as a designer, you can never completely understand the context, all you can do is immerse yourself in the context as much as possible and do your best to understand it.

Changing values

How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

The graduation studio focuses on 20th century heritage. In the Netherlands, many new buildings continue to be built, while we possess a large amount of existing vacant buildings. These buildings are often empty because their former function has often become irrelevant. In a lot of cases this is the result of societal developments. We also see this in shopping centres. Many shops today are empty, as a result of, for example, the economic crisis or the rise of online shopping. These complexes are specifically designed as shopping centres, making it difficult to adapt to another function. Trying to solve the vacancy of these shopping centres is not the only motive to adapt the structures, reusing existing architecture also has a beneficial effect on the environment.

My design attempts to set an example of how vacant shopping centres can be transformed. In addition to housing, the design includes a number of new functions specifically linked to demand in the local community, so these functions might differ in a different design. Still, it remains an example of how leisure, culture and education could be added to an area that lacks this. This creates new life in the area, and a new future for the existing buildings. It is also interesting to be more aware of the built environment in which you work. Buildings to which we attach no or less value today, were once designed through certain principles. While we may not value these principles today, they used to be valued. It is therefore interesting to explore building transformation history to perhaps place more value on past principles within a new design.

20th century heritage

What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (Ar, Ur, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

For as long as I can remember I have been interested in history. This used to manifest itself mainly in interest in general and art history. During my studies, I found that although I also enjoyed designing new buildings, my interest lies more in transforming and renovating something existing. I really appreciate it when there is a context to which you can relate as a designer. Doing research on existing buildings, uncovering certain structures, discovering design choices and evaluating it with a certain appreciation is something I find immensely interesting. This made me more certain that I wanted to focus more on heritage in the continuation of my studies. During my MSC1 and MSC2 I also found more and more interest for research, I enjoyed the space given for research before starting an actual design. During these projects it began to crawl more to continue with this research aspect. So, I decided to add another year to my studies to delve more deeply into what I still found interesting. I went to Amsterdam for one more year to study architectural history at the VU Amsterdam. Here I developed an interest in the relationship between social discussions and architecture. I noticed that I really like doing research, so to explore this a bit more I started an internship at Crimson Historians & Urbanists in Rotterdam. With Crimson I worked on a number of cultural historical research projects, for example on Schiphol Airport and a post-war school building in Amsterdam west. One of the most important things I learned is the appreciation for post-war architecture in the Netherlands. Before, I was more interested in really old buildings, but during my internship this certainly changed. That contributed to the fact that when the Modern Malls studio was announced, it immediately piqued my interest. There is currently so much new heritage in the Netherlands that is little appreciated. This heritage was also designed with certain ideals, and although we may not pursue these ideals today, it does not make it any less interesting to research them and preserve them for the future. I felt like it would be a lot of fun to dive into the typology of the mall, and discover what the post-war principles were by which these centers were designed. The social context of this period, who were the centers designed for and did these people actually use them; and why don't they do

it now? Can we reverse this trend and revitalize these shopping centers, what would it take to do this? In my graduation project I want to find out how to make the mall locally relevant again. In my research I tried to find which social values are still recognizable in the mall and which architectural interventions can strengthen the social aspect of the mall. From this research I try to create a redesign where architectural interventions strengthen the social value of the shopping mall.

The bigger relation to the master track Architecture can be found in creating a place to stay. My project is about creating a living environment that is not only sustainable in a sense of energy efficiency, but more about extending the lifespan of a building, that could potentially have a heritage value in the future. It is about keeping and protecting certain social and cultural values of the neighbourhood, the shopping centre and its buildings.

The future of the Modern Mall

Currently we live in a very fast-changing world. The role of the modern mall is changing. These changes are happening incredibly fast, for example, at the beginning of the 20th century there was still euphoria about new technical inventions; the escalator and the lift allowed shopping centres to build over more than one floor high. Shopping was a social event. About a hundred years later, we can hardly imagine actually having to go to a physical shop; shopping is faster, easier and more convenient online. These developments will keep on continuing, for example, I read an article in the NRC this week that since January 1st, this year, for the first time ever, there are more webshops than physical shops in the Netherlands. This is something we probably could not have been thinking of a hundred years ago. We can, therefore, hardly imagine now what will happen in the next hundred years, which concepts will be very common in a hundred years' time?

What we do know is that since the 1990s the demand for public space has increased. This demand has increased even more since the corona pandemic, our social life has been at a total standstill for almost three years and the need for personal contact has only increased as a result. There has been more demand for neighbourhood and city centres, a place where people can meet.

Can the modern mall regain this function? To find a resilient future for these modern malls, it is important to look carefully at who we are designing for, who are these people and what can serve as an important amenity in their lives? This is different in every place.

We can learn from history, the designs for the modern malls often focused on the relationship between commercial and entertainment/culture. The modern mall offered democratic leisure, the flâneur was free and for all. Perhaps, then, a simple solution for the modern mall is enough, perhaps simple things, a vegetable garden or a terrace, a play area, music or coffee, things that make the residents of this place happy. A city centre reconnected to its residents, a place where religion, governance, commerce and culture come together, a public space that belongs to everyone, accessible and not congested. A place where culture and heritage come together, part of our collective memory. Where the stories of the city are passed on.

Graduating within 20th century heritage studio

What am I taking from this graduation year?

This graduation year, to me, has been a great challenge but also a great learning experience. As I described before, I really learnt to design in between different scale levels, the incorporation of building technology in the early stages of my design process have taught me a lot, and have led to a more integral design process. I learnt a lot of different things on specific topics, but based on the set up of this graduation studio I will take two main things into my future.

First, *the notice of sketching and drawings by hand*. During this year, we as a group were really encouraged to start sketching. At first this always feels a little bit uncomfortable, since I won't describe myself as the best in drawing by hand. But during this year it really taught me that by drawing by hand will give you so much more freedom. First of all, it gives you more freedom to try and understand how an

original building is constructed before you have to have it all figured out to put it in the computer. Secondly it gives you the opportunity to easily test different options within your design. When you're not sure how something needs to be designed, a simple piece of sketch paper gives you the opportunity to try different things before coming to a final result in the computer. When you put something in the computer it always feels a lot more definitive, while putting it on a piece of sketch paper leaves a lot more possibility for change. Lastly and complementary to this, I feel like drawing by hand gives you so much more creative freedom. When I start on working on the computer in the early stages of a design I really feel like this limits your creative process. For example, the façade I've drawn, I'm still not completely sure how to build it in a 3D model, however I do know how to draw it by hand. There is a big possibility that when I've started working on a 3D model earlier in this process, my façade would not have ended up like it is now, simply because I didn't know how I would build it in a computer model.

Secondly, *the kill your own darlings' principle*, a design is never finished and it can always be improved. I feel like, when designing it's always luring to stick to your original plan and to feel like you designed the building in the best possible way. However, in most of the cases this is not true. By trial and error, you will find a good way to solve a problem, I would necessarily say the best way, since I don't know if there is one ultimate truth of how to design things. But I really feel like this year I learnt this trial and error process, you really have to try different options to find out different solutions, or to even find out maybe your first option was a good solution, but to find this you have to try other options as well. It's easy to stick to your first initial idea but trying out different things can really help you bringing your design to a different stage.

I would like to finish this reflection with a short (thankyou) note for the tutoring sessions. During this reflection I described the process I've been through, the things I learnt and the things I would like to take from this graduation studio. All this has been made possible by the inspiring tutoring sessions I've had, for design, but also for building technology and for research. Therefore, I would like to finish with thanking my mentors, Lidy Meijers, Frank Koopman and Lidwine Spoormans. Thank you, for really inspiring me the past year and really help me developing my ideas.