Museum of Magical Realism Arnhem (MMRA)

“Connecting the KEMA terrain with the city centre of Arnhem by the use of art”

Reflection

Maartje Meijs_1276611

RMIT_KEMA

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Museum Of Magical Realism Arnhem

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Maartje Meijs
Vlamingstraat 50A
2611 KX Delft
m.c.meijs@student.tudelft.nl
maartjecmeijs@gmail.com
+31 641069547

Student number: 1276611
RMIT studio Master in Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences
Faculty of Architecture
TUDelft

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Supervisors: Lidy Meijers and Frank Koopman

__Introduction

__By means of this reflection I will evaluate the different steps taken during my graduation project. This will supply an insight into which steps helped me the most gaining results. On the other hand, with this reflection I will give an overview of the underlying arguments for my interventions, by means of the evaluation of my design attitude.
First I will look back on my process of analysis, research and design and I will explain which three design decisions were crucial for my graduation project. Then I will tell something about my design attitude by explaining which ideas were leading for elements in the design.
I will continue by answering my research questions and ultimately I will close with recommendations, both for hypothetic future RMIT students but maybe more importantly for myself. What is the way of designing that I can or will use in the future?

__Process

__My design process can be divided into three different steps: analysing, researching and designing. In this chapter I will give an explanation of these different steps, their characteristics and consequences.
The first quarter of the year was assigned to the analysis of the existing situation and structures. This analysis was made on different scale levels, varying from urban scale to architectural and building technological scale. There were two aspects of the analysis of the KEMA terrain that to my opinion can be considered as most important. The first thing is the historical development of the terrain. Also called the story behind the terrain. This shows which functions are located where, why the park is designed like this and how the buildings extended over years.
The park is designed in the English landscape architecture. This implies that there is a very low density of structures in the green park. The height of the buildings is due to the rules of the English landscape architecture never higher than the height of the tops of the trees. Winding roads connect these buildings, that don't have direct sight to each other, with each other. However, when the activities expanded to the south of the terrain, near the river the Rhine, the rules of the English landscape architecture were in these parts abandoned. This and the fact that the roads and the train track are leading through the terrain resulted in a strong differentiation between the different parts: Den Brink, Mariendal, Rosande and The Hes. I continued focussing the most on Den Brink while that area causes the most vacancy, has with it's national monuments the most historical value and is with its trees and high differences aesthetically the most interesting part to my opinion.

The other most important aspect is the question concerning the urban analysis; *'What is the relationship between the city centre of Arnhem and the KEMA terrain?'*
Despite the fact the terrain is surrounded by barbed wire and the area is quite unknown by the inhabitants of Arnhem, there is a great non-physical connection

between both. The areas are connected in terms of location, function and by history. Because the distance between both is only 2 km, both are known for their interest in energy and finally the history of the Kema terrain and the city centre of Arnhem go decades back.
The conclusion of my urban analysis was logically: the KEMA terrain should be accessible for the inhabitants of Arnhem and the rest of the Netherlands, so as much as possible people can visit the beautiful Den Brink Park and encounter its beautiful surroundings and national monuments.

Then the objects on the terrain were analysed, on both architectural and building technological level. By making this analyses it was possible to determine which aspects of the building were the most valuable ones and which aspects contribute less to this.
The buildings on Den Brink are all build around 1930 and designed in the Haagse School style. This style is characterised by it's typically KEMA brickwork, horizontally orientated structures and cantilevering roofs. This similarity in style resulted in a coherent ensemble of structures.
The findings of these analyses were translated into a value assessment.

The building I decided to redesign is the high voltage laboratory, situated on a little hill in the middle of Den Brink, next to one of the main roads of the terrain. The former laboratory is designed in 1938 by architect Fels and extended with a new big hall by Hamerpagt in 1963. This extension is not noticeable from the exterior while the architecture was carried out in exactly the same style.
I found out there are many perspectives on which the decisions about the value assessment can be based. For me the most important ones were cultural historical aspects and spatial qualities. I found it very interesting to research this actual existing building on all different themes like materialisation, dimensions, connection with surroundings, location, climate system, incidence of light, acoustics, colour and so on.
The masterplan I made together with Rikst Dikstra and Judith Rodenburg was based on the findings of our urban analysis. It felt like our duty to reopen the park and make it public for as many as possible visitors. Because the conclusion from the urban analysis was to connect the KEMA terrain with Arnhem, we decided to make a function in Den Brink especially for Arnhem. Since Arnhem has a unique position in the cultural field of the Netherlands because the whole creative chain of education, production and presentation is widely represented in all the different kind of arts like fashion, dance, music, theatre and fine arts.[1]
That is why we introduced ArtparkArnhem and found a solution for the weak points in the existing masterplan like entrances, connections and too many cars in the area. Defining the exact program for the redesign for a building, in my case the high voltage laboratory, was a choice based on personal preferences.

[1] Stroom Beleidsnota Arnhem 2011http://www.gelderlander.nl/multimedia/archive/02191/Cultuurnota_2011_2191285a.pdf

During my studies architecture at the TUDelft I have always wanted to design a museum and in this case I think it will be a perfect public and specific function for attracting people to the KEMA terrain.

At this moment, the analysing- and researching-part were flowing into each other. This because I still analysed, not the urban fabric or the building anymore, but different types of museums. I didn't find it annoying to visit as much as possible museums in the Netherlands, Belgium and Barcelona and analysed important themes of the building like, light, routing and spatial experience. At the same time I also did research on the history of museums, read literature and especially learned a lot from the book *Musea: idee&architectuur.*[2]
A museum's job is actually two-sided: storage and protection of the art pieces and on the other hand, leading people and guiding them on their journey through the building. The main research tool for me however was not literature in this stage but interviewing people.
I started with a man that studied museology. He told me a lot of things I already implied but I couldn't really check, so it helped to have a second opinion. He told me a lot about for instance the logistics in a museum, the target group and he gave me a fantastic book about all the climate and technical aspects about a museum and the material it is showing.[3] This turned out a bit harder than I in first instance thought.

The collection for the museum is the Scheringa collection. This is a collection of about 1000 oil paint pieces made by Dutch painters in the thirties. The movement of the pieces is magical realism; it finds its inspiration in dreams and delusions. I am quit interested in art myself, but this movement was still a bit unknown by me so to get to know more about the paintings, their sizes, characteristics and atmosphere, I made an appointment with Belia van der Giessen, former director of the Scheringa museum. Van der Giessen explained me a lot about the actual collection while she worked for years with the collection and can be called an expert on the field of magical realism. During my research I found out that Arnhem is already familiar with magical realism and the Museum of Moderne Kunst Arnhem (MMKA) houses already numerous paintings made in this art movement.
I already read by that time that this museum was become to small and wanted to extend so I was curious to the possibilities of thinking about a dependence museum in the area. To specify these thoughts I interviewed Miriam Windhausen, head of museological issues at the MMKA. This was also a very fertile and useful conversation. I was guided through the whole museum that wasn't open that day and I could see how the new exhibition was organised in the rooms. Also did she show me the offices and depot of the museum, parts I had never been before.

Now there was all this information in my head, gained by experts, books and my own intellect and imagination. I had to structure everything so I went back to my main starting points; first the building and it's most valuable points. Then I organised the most important starting points from the term 'museum'. Finally the characteristics

[2] E. Chlimintzas, Musea: idee & architectuur 2004, SUN
[3] Preventieve Conservering, Landelijk Contact van Museumconsolenten (LCM)

about the art movement magical realism were listed, while the museum should be designed especially for this collection.
The Program of Requirements is based on both the former Scheringa museum in Spanbroek, as well on the newly build one by Herman Zeinstra in Opmeer.

Because the amount of m2 of the program was bigger than the available amount of m2 in the former high voltage laboratory, I had the choice to make extra floors in the existing building or make an extension next to the laboratory. There was also a choice to use another building at the KEMA terrain as well but then the result would be that people should walk outside while visiting the museum, good to encounter the beautiful park, but logistically seen not very useful.
Because the main hall is one of the most important values about the building, the choice was easy; extra floors were not an option. To make the connection with nature and the height differences strong, the extension is partly realised under the ground. Consequences of building under the ground are first of al the fact that natural ventilation is not an option and secondly due to lack of daylight, artificial light is very important. For the attentive reader: these two also apply for designing a museum!
As a consequence for building in a hilly landscape, I worked a lot with models. That is actual not always been one of my design techniques, but on paper the hills aren't that clear and touchable. I must admit that I found it very positive and I found out that they doesn't have to be very beautiful or detailed before models tell you something about the location or shape of building parts.

What I found difficult during the design process was the environment the building in in. Very beautiful, but I was certainly not used to design something situated in the middle of a park. In all of the former projects I designed during my studies, the size, proportions, materialisation or at least directions or colours where derived from the surrounding buildings.
Another difficulty was getting a grip on the height differences. The hill where the high voltage laboratory is located in and on has differences up to almost 16 meters. Such height differences are rare in the Netherlands, what a change!

In general I can say that after the analysis, which I really enjoyed doing, I had gathered so much information that it was hard to select the things that were the most important. That is why my design process started a bit later than planned. At the time we had to give our P2 presentation, I was not ready yet to present my design proposal, which had arisen to soon and to fast.
This is something I noticed before in my design processes, in the beginning I find it hard to make clear decisions that will bring me further, even when it turns out not to be a good decision. This is better than not making choices at all and it that way standing still. Fortunately a few weeks and some design proposals later, I suddenly got into the right flow. Just by looking specific at the program of requirements and the different kind of pieces of art and their needs, I was able to make a concept for the interventions.

One of the three design decisions that were crucial in my process is the earlier mentioned extension of almost 2000 m2. This was in comparison with the existing building an enormous amount of square meters. Though now I reflect on this I believe it was a good choice because in this way I strengthened all the values of the existing laboratory like the facades, the main hall in his greatness and the special construction in this hall. By designing spaces partly under the ground I kept showing respect to the old building. This brings me to the second design decision what actually was connected with the extension; building under the ground. I never did it before and ofcourse it ment a lot to the whole design, in terms of how to build it, how to get light in until emergency exits and the climate system. Despite the fact there was maybe more work and research needed, I found it very interesting to dive deeper into all these new aspects and challenges and a student 'ondergronds bouwen', a new master at civil engineering, helped me a lot. As last decision I would name that when I saw the building for the first time, the old steel window frames charmed me. It was very hard to keep them originally because of the climate system in museums that have to be perfect, but on the first floor I did it. I devised a system with a second skin on the interior whereby the thermal boundary was partly put back. I am very happy with this system, it makes the spaces both inside and outside perfect for their needs and I love not choosing the easiest solution.

__Design attitude

A very important part of the design task was to determine an appropriate design attitude towards the redesign of an existing structure. This is important since this attitude determines for a large part the rules for your design.
I believe there is not a generic rule for all structures that are being reused. Besides the state of a building, also the history is important, the story behind a building, changing in every case. This can be noticeable in the materialisation but for instance in another example only in the details or the organisation of spaces.
Roughly seen I believe in the statement: *strengthen the positive points and improve the negative points.*
To my opinion there is always a justification for the changing or adding of certain parts because a building implies that there is a function settled in it. An empty building is not doing what it is meant for and to my opinion that is a weak point in the character of a building. So if a building should be adjusted before it is a working building again, that is what should happen.

In the case of the high voltage laboratory, I believe in showing respect to the old building by designing the additions in a contrasting architecture. The volumes on the other side of the road, opposite the building, are realised in a different materialisation, a brown coloured nature stone with relief that fits the old materialisation of brick but doesn't try to overrule or imitate this existing facades. Also in terms of volumes does the extension reply on the existing, but it is not the same. Due to respect I also made the visible addition above the ground only 27% of the existing laboratory.

I will now explain three of my most important research questions and their answers.

"How to transform the high voltage laboratory at the KEMA terrain into a new museum for magical realistic art"?

The answer to this main research question is actually implied in the design of the museum. In general I could say that the method I applied is start finding out what a museum is and which requirements it should fulfil. To transform a laboratory, two things are very important: First of all the big laboratory that used to be for machines should be changed in a way the building has become suitable for human beings, which of course has everything to do with scale. Secondly, the building should not only be transformed in a way people can be comfortable in it, also the paintings should be protected in such a way a museum behoves. This of course has everything to do with, also scale, but maybe more importantly with walls, light, and a perfect climate.
In this specific case the museum will not be for all types of art but especially for the Scheringa collection with 1000 oil paint art pieces made by Dutch painters in the thirties. The fact that the museum is designed for this specific collection is visible in for example the colours, materials and themes that play in a role in as well the collections as the design of the building, like for instance depth, scale and the use of light.

"What is a museum in the 21st century"?

In 500 BC already the concept of a museum existed. Collecting things and showing them because of educational interest is going on for ages. Despite the fact that nowadays museums are not only old and dusty anymore and attract a lot of different people, there are still a lot of different ones, from the Uffizi in Florence till Nemo in Amsterdam. But, what I found out was that the museums through the years are all changing from this waiting character into a moving direction, to meet the public. This is realised by the increasing importance of for example the museum restaurant, espresso bar and museum shop. People are not only visiting museums for looking at art anymore, but also for meeting each other. They are not only coming to a museum to learn something, they want to encounter an experience. Museums are becoming more interactive with the use of projects, performances, readings, films etc. How neutral is a museum these days actually? What are exhibition designers trying to communicate when they are decorating an exhibition room?
A museum is receiving more and more an important place in the contemporary city.

"How to attract visitors"?

The attraction of visitors is a theme that comes back in the design on several scale levels. To start with the urban scale; if we zoom out, the idea is that the KEMA terrain should open up to its surroundings and the public. Fences and barbed wire were removed and the public was attracted by the specific public function that Arnhem needed: Artpark Arnhem. To make the connection with the city centre more physical, we introduced a cultural route from the centre, via the MMKA (Museum Moderne Kunst Arnhem) and further to the KEMA terrain. This route could lead

along the river or the greenery of the Veluwe and be accentuated by placing pieces of art, signs, graffiti or information along it.
To attract visitors in the museum, one of the main roads in the park is literally going through the museum, the existing part on the one hand en the extension on the other. The square before the museum is located between the Zoetenlab ensemble; the most densed part of Den Brink en the museum. This place is designed in a way people can talk, stay, sit, walk and enjoy the view there.
Then, standing on the square, one can have a look upstairs in the museum through a big window that shows on the one hand people walking there, enjoying art and on the other hand a big 4 by 6 meters piece of art, so they are getting curious and want to have a look inside.
On the smallest scale, the scale of the building, the entrance is designed in such way people see from a giant distance whether the museum is open or closed by the enormous pivot doors. The whole plinth of the entrance is as fordable as possible by putting the actual façade one is entering a meter back. Once inside, arrived in the main hall, people can have a coffee, buy something in the museum shop and enjoy the temporarily exhibition in the hall, all still without paying.

__Recommendations

My advice to future RMIT students will be choose a building you immediately love and get to know everything about it. Imagine yourself living in the time the building was still used as the function it was designed for and be precise in what is worth keeping but don't be afraid to extend or change things because that will be a future part of the story of that building. Like Pythagoras already said: 'omnia mutantur, nihil interit'.[4]

And to conclude is my advise to myself to just draw and try things in an earlier stage of the design process instead of continuing to search for more evidence to justify certain decisions. Because, how realistic architecture is, sometimes science is not enough and is it just a matter of trying things. Because it is not all rational, in the end is it also a matter of feeling and you will find out whether a design decision is the good one when you visualise it.

[4] 'omnia mutantur, nihil interit' means 'everything changes, nothing perishes.' Phythagoras, 500 BC