

P2 GRADUATION PLAN

Studio:

DESIGN AS POLITICS [WWW.DESIGNASPOLITICS.NL]

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Master Graduation Research Method Overview

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Project Title: *"Fever in Rotterdam; Timmerhuis"*
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I. Introduction

Ia. Studio Framework

My graduation project is going to be developed under the umbrella of the studio 'Design as Politics', which currently is dealing with the financial and political procedures that take place in the background of the design process and since being at the helm, seem to affect the entire procedure preceding and following the building's completion.

Ib. Topic

Contemporary buildings, strongly affected by the indubitable city branding that is experienced globally, tend to bow to the neoliberal environment that aids the development of their rarefied functions along with the globally controlled financial system that provides the elements for their manifestation. Under these circumstances, iconic architecture has become the new convention, unable though to counterpoise the needs of the masses, but instead leaning to the side of the corporations and the private interests. Our main point is not a mere arraignment of the current state of things or a lese majesty over architects' production, but an in depth involvement to the out of boundaries principles that have come to characterized our future profession, where buildings are rendered by their edacity for financial profits.

My hypothesis investigates the ways in which public space is affected by capital flows and financial oriented decisions in the context of neoliberal or conservative political systems¹ in the Western world, focusing in the Netherlands.

Ic. Approach

'Timmerhuis'²; the semi-private, under development new city hall [Stadskantoor] of OMA³, that is about to be built in the Rotterdam downtown area will be thoroughly investigated under a financial scope, which is going to draw the various

relations among money routes that correlate both with the building itself and the parties that take advantage of its multiple functions. Following these guidelines, we will try to deeply understand the fundamental reasons that led to the creation of the building, along with the main factors that turned out to be critical for the further disownment that multiple functions of the building underwent, including the disappearance of the public space and the numerous changes in number concerning the starters homes which were about to be built. Thus, critique is going to be developed against various aspects, initially starting from the finances and going through other architectural principles such as sustainable features and mixed uses. Furthermore, due to the various interested parties that played an important role from the first steps of the development, we will try to separate and investigate their role and motives, as long as their relation to one another, leading to how all these personal and money relationships affected the design.

II. Counterargument

As expected, the parties related to Timmerhuis are of various origins, spanning among political [Rotterdam municipality, council parties], economical [BNG⁴ bank, Economic European Union], architectural [OMA and 4 more architectural offices that participated in the last phase of the contest], constructional [Heijmans⁵ and ABT⁶], juridical [the Rotterdam jury] and governmental [Netherlands economic principles throughout the entire country] sectors, all together forming an interesting relational map.

The provided, internal municipality information are even by this time, [12 Dec. 2013] that the building is under construction, clueless on how the reformed "public-turned-into-market" space will work; space will be segregated into smaller pieces to be rented to private companies and therefore provide income in the long run. However so far there seems to be no

¹ An extensive research on similar topics can already be found in the books of the geographer-sociologist David Harvey [see references].

² A closer look at: timmerhuisrotterdam.nl

³ Another overview here: oma.eu

⁴ Abbreviation for: Bank Nederlandse Gemeenten (Dutch Municipal Bank); bng.nl.

⁵ More info at: heijmans.nl

⁶ More info at: abt.eu

specific client, no rents and what is more no interest from any corporation. The speculation mostly derives from the “reputational power”⁷ of the architectural office of OMA. The open call and free pass to international funds for supporting the buildings very existence and the municipality’s local economy in parallel, though, contradicts the latest surveys of economic analysts and various related institutions such as the World Bank both of which have been promoting investment in domestic income in order to help countries regenerate their economies in the shade of a possible new crisis.

A lot of attention has also been gravitated towards the “sustainable” features of the building, a thematic which was also used - by the architecture offices that lost the first place in the contest – as the Trojan horse that led the entire discussion to a jury. According to Reinier de Graaf, director of AMO and supervisor of the entire design process, Timmerhuis was built to be the most sustainable building in the entire Nederlandse area; the entire steel skeleton is composed by four (4) different types of structural columns which are easily demountable, giving the building the attributes of a “tent”. For him, sustainability dodges the common, mere meaning, eventually rendered as “durability” and adaptability in the coming years. Their building scored a 76, 6 % in the BREEAM analysis overview, the highest rate so far for a building in the country.

So far, much of the intended research plans are already altered, since grave competition among these institutes has been balking my efforts to delve into more specific information concerning the project’s background. On the other hand various experts and project-related specialists from multiple scientific areas⁸ have been willing to share not only information – mostly through interviews - but also their personal views and opinions⁹ that introduced more perspectives on the already established research routes. The aforementioned procedure is going to lead to a pattern that will reveal the coaptation between economics and architecture that in turn will aid the design procedure, manifested as a *what if* statement; an initially theoretical approach of what could have been done with the same amount of money, materials and labor as an alternative for the city. A project focused on fundamentally *increasing the public performance* of the citizens of Rotterdam. All in all, the research approach will build the argumentation prior to the extraction of the decisions, upon which the design process will be generated.

⁷ Rachel Botsman argues that “Reputation is the measurement of how much a community trusts you [...] and can indirectly be translated to actual value, hence money.” [online, Rachel Botsman, 2012, TED talks]

⁸ Especially the professor of building technology in TU Delft and former member of the contest jury concerning the stadskantoor sustainability, Andy van den Dobbelaars and the member of the municipal Stadswinkel office, Leon Wielaard.

⁹ Mostly through architecture related forums and platforms such as: skyscraper.com.

III. Argumentation

The whole virtual research process that has been set in motion from my part is taking place parallel to the actual building of the City Hall; a synecdoche of a real event performed in the hypothetical space, effectively translated into an actual design in the final stage, mirroring the Timmerhuis.

The design approach is going to derive from another “reading” of the information which will bubble up to the surface through the aforementioned approach, therefore leading to a new type of building en bloc, not entirely compromised to politico-economic guidance but instead, a building focusing on the needs of the People – that receive only a pittance from today’s architecture - and not the Market; not an antitype of the stadskantoor, but a space serving the social needs, denouncing the capital interests. In that sense, much time was spent in the investigation of the typology of active economic models and their structure which might regenerate Timmerhuis. These models will serve not only as the backdrop for a solid epistemological thesis but will provide the founded grounds from which the design approach will be routed.

Eventually, the mixed program that compromised the public response of the edifice will be reduced to the generation of a social housing project which will reintroduce the previously annihilated public space on the ground floor. The target group on which we will focus on, is a special layer of business people in the Dutch social structure, called ZZP’ers; this immediately translates into a further extensive anthropological research on their characteristics, their needs and their economical background, so that the design will eventually merge their personal needs with the general aims settled by the local municipality back in 2009 when the decision for creating the new City Hall was taken. ZZP’ers characteristics vary spanning from various nationalities to multiple working professions, therefore we are able to talk about the development of not just a housing project, but also a community headquarters in the heart of the city.

We are taking as a given the already under construction welded steel skeleton of Timmerhuis, the presence of which will further enable the design development of the low-cost houses that are going to be attached to the residuum 3D steel frame. Consequently, a further design research will establish the connection among this project and the entire Dutch social housing concept that in turn will help us muster the needed data for the creation of housing complex. Examples of internationally successful identical projects¹⁰ might also provide interesting views of sheer importance, to be retrofitted to the project, improving its quality both architecturally and financially. This procedure requires accordingly a typological catalogue of housing references throughout the entire 20th

¹⁰ Special attention will be given to the currently built social housing projects in Chile by Alejandro Aravena.

century that would supply information not only concerning dimensions and numeric values but also relations among the apartment itself and the facilities / amenities in the building (kind, proximity, access).

Special attention is given to the legacy of the Dutch way of designing social housing, a process that involves another translation of the Neufert measurements coding into “matjes”¹¹; standardized volumes into which a very specific action is happening and by further combinations produces the house plan. Their sizes are based on the material industry and the size of the elements used to build them.

The sustainability concept in bold terms is highly controversial – the contest committee had serious arguments from the beginning; the steel frame (implying the use of expensive, external ores), the costly, chemical nanogel insulation and the strangely large amount of glass for the facades does not comply to any survey concerning sustainable, nature friendly buildings.

Under the circumstances and as far as materials and construction are concerned, we decided to use the recycled material waste produced after the destruction / demolition of existing buildings in the area close to the site / city. The construction company ‘Oranje’¹² has already developed a patent that enables them to extract materials such as concrete from the demolished buildings; an action that resembles reversed chemical processes through which chemists reproduce the elements needed for the initial reaction. The current annual stock of 20.000 buildings waiting in the demolition line might provide more than enough material for filling the holes of the skeleton and forming the housing units and their subdivided spaces; one of these buildings would hypothetically be the “Robeco Toren” near the Maas River in Rotterdam, which is scheduled to become vacant in 2016. An estimation sheet of the renewed costs and the possible savings using this mode operandi will be created, proving once again the sustainable aspects of the project. From another point of view, it is important to take into consideration the legal aspects that direct the rent costs in relation to volume of the house, in order to achieve maximum profits for the occupants by rearranging the design – an early stage process developed under the moniker “Klushuizen”¹³. Klushuizen has already been approved as a method for dealing with vacant buildings that for multiple reasons – economically related in their majority – have been turned into urban slams.

The relation of architectural quality design and economics is demanding the use of relative designing software, based on BIM calculations, subsequently leading to the use of Autodesk Revit;

a choice that will help us prove ultimately that our alternative proposal is a mightier solution, more sensible and economically sustainable, against the current project. All these factors are taking into serious consideration before actually moving to the next step of producing blueprints of the final proposal.

IV. Conclusion

Overall, the project is an example of how architecture can respond to these times of financial recession and economic hardships for a grant majority of the population; especially the middle classes that tend to constantly lose power, overshadowed by the global events we have been experiencing since 2008. A subtle but yet powerful project that introduces multiple alternatives in the decision-making principles and the way in which public money are manipulated, from the perspective of the European well-fare state that was introduced after World War II and especially during the 1960’s and 1970’s. “Timmerhuis” boosted my insight on the actual, non-academic features that form a project in the actual market, relating it to almost every social aspect and making it vulnerable to the aggressive funds; nonetheless, it also revealed a hidden architectural arsenal that might be of great use for the architecture practitioners during an era filled both with uncertainty and hope for the future to come.

¹¹ Multiple works of the Dutch architect Noud de Vreeze are related to the process of industrialization and modularization of the housing components.

¹² More info at: oranje-bv.nl

¹³ Dutch in the text; “custom-made houses” – an under development process among the architecture office of Hulshof and various Dutch municipalities

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