Graduation Reflection – P4

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Title: Wolvenplein or challenging the prison: to hell and back again; a tale about a student struggling to overcome inherent problems of architecture itself

ExploreLab offers the change to students to explore a fascination through research that isn’t bound to architectural style/program/theme. With guidance from self-sought teachers the student can determine his own course during the graduation process. This gives tremendous freedom but also a great responsibility, in planning and in course determination. Given the fact that I had such a fascination, one I shared with Bob de Rijk, the choice of studio was a no brainer. This graduation has been a joint venture from the beginning; the research has been done in close collaboration and the design in fruitful contrast.

THE RESEARCH

The research we have been doing focused on the architectural form of reform in the prison building: we sought to create understanding about the translation of concepts of man to an architectural form. The prison was in this sense chosen because it occupies an extreme in the field of architecture, no other building has such a clear conception about how it should be used and what kind of effect it should have on a human being.

The eventual results of the research show a building and an institution that tries to control the human individual, separate it from the ‘normal’ individual as a delinquent and once released still imprison him/her in a stigma.

RESEARCH NARRATIVES THAT FUELLED THE DESIGN

The research and the understanding of the prison building, its functioning and historical development has fuelled the design process, in all its aspects. It didn’t just help in modifying the existing material of the building but it has literally shaped the context in which the design has meaning. All the design decisions, which can be explained on their own terms, gain significance
in the context that the research provides. This has given the design the needed depth but it has also created a challenge to go beyond the descriptive. This has much to do with the nature of research itself, although it can help you to create an understanding, it can never prescribe a certain action. The promise of this possible conclusion that can make certain design choices for you can at times be a tempting motive to delay a choice only you can make. It was at times also a hurdle because the very nature of our project prohibited us from designing with the emphasis on function; we had to unlearn something we have been taught since entering this university.

I’ll try to reconstruct some parts of the narrative that clearly show how the design and the research have fuelled each other.

FUNCTIONING

The prison deliberately mediates human experience. It is engineered to map relations of sight, access, supervision and ‘privacy’. In this engineering it has become purposefully one-dimensional, there is no negotiation or encounter, it is a total environment, where the guard can choose to see and/or be seen and the prisoner cannot. By detaining and controlling the prison breaks the conventional connection between meaning and action. The prison as an institution limits action and dictates meaning.

By creating a dense environment with a plethora of functions the encounters and power dynamics become unpredictable and small conflicts will occur that need to be mediated by human interaction. Conflict in itself is beneficiary to our understanding of the human condition and the “other”.

The abandoned prison in its re-use as an agglomeration of all the usual functions of any re-use design, creates an almost literal hyperbole, not only for its reflection on re-use as a design strategy but as a design strategy in itself to create a pressure cooker of different programs that, collide, meet, conflict and interact in a floorplan that was conceived to contain, subject and conquer the human individual.

The design converts the power of the building from inside out, re-using it’s basic principle, that of the surveyed gallery, against itself not by changing it, but by changing that which it gives access to. The surveyed gallery exerts power over its cells because it controls what can occur
behind all its doors. Nothing can take place beyond the margins of the cell because it is contained within the logistics of its system. If you change what's behind the door, the surveyed gallery becomes powerless. Instead of knowing by seeing, it assumes to know and doesn't. The watchful eye in the gallery can no longer exert control, but can merely perceive the spectacle. Instead of an all-knowing position, one has to explore to understand. The fragment isn't explanatory for the entire building, nor does the building as a whole explain its different fragments.

The design doesn't focus on organizing its functions, because the gallery provides access and distribution to all the different spaces.

FORM

The prison building is one of the earliest adaptors of standardization, and did this to an extreme level. When this building was introduced it provided running water, mechanized heating, mechanized ventilation and plumbing to all its occupants in equal measure (at least in theory), the exact same amount of floor space and literally the same pieces of furniture.

The architectural language that I developed in the design must be seen as an reply to this standardization, it is an attempt to create different spaces in a stacked building; non-uniform spaces that are an essential part of the architecture and not a matter of interior design. The form language is limited to a few standard elements (the wall, the slab, the light well and the roofscape) that are employed through a consistent logic; in unison they compose the building. Although the building is made up out of these simple elements, the spaces that it creates are unpredictable. The standardized cells are used as a transitory space, masking the radical changes that have occurred, but also providing a repeated frame through which the new space can be mapped. In this sense, the design is a parasite that leeches on the existing ‘functional’ structure, while destroying its controlling mechanics.

Standardization creates a strange understanding. It becomes a self-propelling logic, fed by the unfounded logic of fitting a building around a function. For if something fits in a floorplan it doesn’t mean it has to be, if something fits, it could be, but numerous other things could be as well. Maybe the most problematic notion in this context is ‘function’, for a function is merely a collection of human (inter)actions that are grouped because of certain traditions, customs and knowledge. It isn't coupled to a form like a hand or an apple. It is merely ordered by architecture and our way of living by a certain form. To design a building using the function as the main
driver of a project seems natural to us (Delft students), to do this in an ordered way seems almost part of the very definition of what design is and to account for group behaviour and their dynamics.

Architecture, defined by the current way of teaching at Delft is simply an ordering of small, medium and big spaces in an organized whole.

RELEVANCE

The project tries to understand and comment on the relation between architectural space and control. The research also bears relevance in a bigger (architectural) scientific framework. Architects often claim to be able to influence, promote and/or determine human behaviour and experience with their architecture, in the Netherlands also referred to as ‘maakbaarheid’. In this discussion the prison is an extreme example of a coercive building, backed by an institution, which aims to achieve certain human behaviour. As such this research aims to be a valuable contribution to the discussion on the role of behaviourism in the architectural discourse. On an even wider scope the research and design raises questions concerning the morals and inalienable rights the prison represents and the deliberate role architecture plays in it.