Reflection
The assignment

The graduation studio of Interiors, Buildings and Cities – Urban Culture and New Openness deals with the design of a new university library for the University of Amsterdam, located in the inner city of Amsterdam. The building should hold a program of 24,000 m² offering an open book-, magazine- and media-collection, a variety of study places, offices, storage- and service-spaces. The program should also hold public functions like a café an exposition space and workshop areas.

The relationship between research and design

In this graduation studio of Interiors, Buildings and Cities the main research is focused on the significance and the possibilities of a new university library in Amsterdam.

In the first semester of the design studio referential analysis formed the main focus of research, backed up by the theoretical background developed in the Research Seminar led by cultural anthropologist Irene Cieraad. The research topics in this Seminar were closely related to the issues of the design project. After having researched the theory in the first semester it was time to start the second semester of the design project with research by design and research by discussion to develop the University library. These methods together have ultimately led to the final products of the design proposal of the graduation studio.

The first report for the research seminar dealt with the significance of the academic library of the 21st century. The main conclusion in this report was that the academic library in general is slowly changing from a place where books and documents are being held to a place where study facilities are offered. One of the main reasons for this change is caused by the so-called ‘digital revolution’, which results in physical books and documents being replaced by digital versions.

The displacement of physical books and documents seems to be less relevant for the design of this graduation project. The reason is that the library is part of the faculty of Humanities, where for a lot of studies the book itself is often the object of research and therefore needs a prominent place where it is available to everyone.

The final report for the research seminar dealt with the possibilities for a new university library at the location ‘Binnengasthuys’ in Amsterdam. In May 2012 the Amsterdam council rejected the building of the winning Library design by Cruz y Ortiz. As a result Stefan de Vos and I decided to start a thorough field research in order to gain information on opinions from students who study at the Binnengasthuys area. By using elicitation as research method the students were asked to value the buildings on the Binnengasthuys and to rate specific design proposals regarding the future library building and the interior of the Binnengasthuys area.
The outcome of the research played a significant role in some design decisions. For example, the decision which buildings to demolish in order to make room for the new library.

During the design process itself most of my research has been about the form, the appearance and typology of the library. Next to the gathering and analysis of referential projects, hundreds of models and schemes were created and tested to optimize the presence of the library in relation to the spatial qualities of the city and the site.
A good example of this designing by testing is the tower which forms part of the library that I propose in my design. This element has undergone a process of ongoing changes. I wanted the tower to be a statement in Amsterdam without being alien to the historic centre of the city and at the same time use the maximum spatial qualities on the direct design location. To achieve this prepossessed goal a lot of models and drawings have been made to research the influence of the tower on the silhouette of the city and to the direct design location.

The Design

The proposal for the new university library for the University of Amsterdam is located on the Binnengasthuys in Amsterdam. Arriving from the Nieuwe Doelenstraat an arcade takes you into the Binnengasthuys area, which forms the heart of the University Campus for the Faculty of Humanities. The arcade is a staged route which leads to the entrance of the building. This public roofed street is a place where fellow students meet, but it also raises awareness of the intellectual significance of the building.
Looking from the arcade into the surrounding library, which can be seen as a place of contemplation, numerous layers of different types of study spaces are visible, while at the same time a certain transparency is created enabling the public courtyards to be viewed on either side of the library.
When entering the main hall of the building a choice of two directions can be made. The direction to the left will lead to the library via a pronounced staircase. The direction to the right leads to the tower, which is situated on the public square of the Binnengasthuys. The tower that functions as a place for communication provides office spaces, lecture rooms and space for (multi)media purposes. The tower also offers a spectacular view over the historic inner city of Amsterdam. On an urban level the tower forms an ending to both the Oudezijds Voorburgwal and the Oudezijds Achterburgwal.

The relationship between the project and the wider social context

The entire research seminar was dedicated to create a sociologic conception on the meaning and implications of a university library.
Not long after my first report on the role of the library in the 21st century, I was amazed to discover that in January of 2013 the first bookless library is set to open in San Antonio, Texas.¹ The fact that the bookless library has now become a reality makes the subject in my first report even more relevant on the significance of the library in general.

Do we want to see the book as a physical source disappear? Do we want all our future libraries to look like giant Apple stores? I think my stance on this matter is quite clear; I still believe in the significance of the physical book and the meaning it should provide to the library in general.

The second report for the seminar dealt with a phenomenon called “studentification’, in which a growing student population move in large numbers to traditionally non-student neighborhoods. Although this subject is not directly related to the university library as a project it did give me an insight on the general implications of a university in the city. Sociologically this phenomenon has both positive and negative impacts on the certain neighbourhoods.

The biggest relationship between the project and the wider social context is the contribution of the building towards its direct surroundings and towards the city as a whole.

“The focus of this Chair is the architecture of the public interior. The city is a place of values, expressed in the way the city is made and built, and in the relations between people that it implies or defines in its spaces and interiors. Our Chair is concerned with those interior spaces in the city that people share, and where they are conscious of each other as individuals in public and as a public.”²

For a project such as the university library the above citation means that the building should not only meet the required program given, it should also provide a certain value for the city as you design a public building with public spaces.

Does my proposal meet with this social theme of the studio? Yes, I think so. By introducing the arcade as a public entrance to the Binnengasthuys and as a place where the different layers of activity and spaces are showcased, it provides access and a visual link towards the two semi-public courtyards on either side of the library, which some local residents never knew existed.

The tower as a landmark in the centre of Amsterdam will not only be a static object, unlike most high office buildings where people only work from 9 till 5. This building has an almost permanent occupation of working students, who will be visible through the open structure of the façades. This building will always have a certain interaction between life out on the streets and the intellectual life inside the library.

² http://www.tudelft-architecture.nl/chairs/interiors
Conclusion

Reflecting upon this entire project has been very enlightening. It helps you realise what you have started out with and what it is has become during the entire process. Not all of the research topics chosen in the research seminar have been relevant to the design project, but the other results gained through study and research have proved to be decisive at various stages. The research methods used for design of the library have proven to be successful and have led to the final proposal, which in my case meet with my personal design goals and the goals set by the studio.