P5 reflection;

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Graduation within the studio

The regular procedure in the studio of Public Building – Public Realm Rotterdam is doing the analysis and research during the first semester (until approximately P2) together in a team of 3 to 4 persons, eventually resulting in a master plan. After P2, the architectural design process starts, where usually every member of the group designs and develops their own particular part of the originated plan. The particular parts that each individual designs are meant to fit together in terms of appearance, construction and details where the building parts meet. However, each student is responsible for his/her own part and will present the design (P3/P4/P5) separately.

In our case, the analysis has been done in a team of four students, which has split into smaller groups at the time that the parameters for the master plan became more specifically defined. From there on, 2 individuals have been working separately on a design project and a duo recently graduated on a design project the have been working on simultaneously from the split up, until P5.

I have experienced that working in a team could be very fruitful. During the research all decisions were made after long discussions and sketching, brainstorming together. Nevertheless, we also found writing as a helpful tool to be able to reflect to our theories anytime we wanted and to set new goals or aims for ourselves.

Sint Jacobsplaats, Rotterdam

The design studio assumes Sint Jacobsplaats in Rotterdam as its main focus. It is located at the end of the Binnenrotte, at the point where the train coming from Rotterdam Centraal is going underground.

The studio focuses on themes such as the relation between public and private, hybridity, densification and greenification of the city, whereas the literature course that is being thought throughout the first semester is directing at notions of modernity, identity, public domain, junk space, place and ‘non place’.
fish-eye perspective of first perception of the city
Throughout the analysis, our first observation of Rotterdam as a collage city, a city containing different, unrelated fragments has been the general topic. From the research I concluded that St. Jacobsplaats has a very ambiguous character that is not clearly expressed and perceived by visitors and users. Also, the site lacks identity and is isolated from the city center. In order to give back a clear identity to the site, a manifest was written and parameters were defined in order to bridge the gap between the intentional design of the master plan, the abstraction of the architectural design.

The project is an attack against modest, restrained urban design. After the final extremeness of modernity, today’s urbanism has developed an almost universal consensus, based on parcellation and typo-morphological continuity of the existing. Each site is typically subdivided into smaller plots and clusters of individual operations by respecting an urban grid and resurrecting the procedures on which the traditional city is based. We all undeniably believe this approach is “right”. Our common fear for the big and the monolithic has driven us to idealize the human scale and the composite.

Let us say out loud: the majority of the urban formation we now construct, and people-friendly language we use, is irredeemably awful, neither intriguing nor surprising. More and more, architects are positioned into demonstrations of peaceful, ego-less coexistence which results into artificial and life-less plans. What we, as architects and urban designers, have lost is our ability to see large, our courage to proclaim large ambitions, our pleasure in being visionaries and our chance to simulate the scenarios of “what ifs”.

We have to state that the seeming failure of today’s urban design and the case of Rotterdam, in particular, offers us an exceptional opportunity to take insane risk, to be bold and ambitious. The city is reinventing itself while being a unique innovative experiement in the context of Europe. It is Fragmented. Collaged. Hybrid. Conracticting. It has no history. No structure. We see this identity as a core quality of Rotterdam. We believe in search for new tools and concepts that are found by anticipating and utilizing the appearance of the city.
how?

phenomenological approach combined with objective analysis

city form (6 topics)

programmatic distribution

movements in the city

flows

people

demographics

questionnaire

conclusion on district level

conclusion on site level

specific conclusion, about the site?

strategy for masterplan

schematical overview of research
Research methodology

We have started our analysis relating our first subjective perception of the city of Rotterdam to the phenomenological approach of Kevin Lynch. His approach seeks to estimate how individuals perceive and navigate the urban landscape through its visual qualities. To help visualize the form of the town, Kevin Lynch uses five basis elements: roads/streets, edges, areas/districts, nodes and landmarks.

For creating a framework for the research, we came to the conclusion that Lynch’s phenomenological approach only would be too subjective and would not help us in fully understanding the way the city center of Rotterdam is working.

Therefore, we have collected data as an objective method of analysis and juxtapose it with the phenomenological approach. Lynch’s approach has been very helpful as they have been the stepping-stones towards our own, more objective method of doing research. One can say that Lynch’s theory might be a little outdated, as it is already over fifty years old, but we tried to make our analysis complementary to his work. We used the idea of the paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks and applied it to the modern contemporary city.

Combining the two methods has enabled us to relate our interpretative findings to a static theoretical framework through which we could question the validity of our own first perception of hybridity and avoid being too blunt or too much one-sided in making design decisions.

Both the objective and the subjective complement each other and form a solid foundation for the design project.

After the analysis we started to define parameters, relating to the conclusions of the research that were helpful to start the developments of the master plan.

Whether the research methodology was a successful, I would say that on one hand defining parameters was a successful method in making the step from analysis to design. It led to systematically described conclusions and clear future design aims. Parameters were defined in terms of program, routing, accessibility, building mass and building height, sight lines, green qualities, and interaction between public and private.

Also, combining the subjective approach with the objective data has enhanced the capacity of both. It is a beneficial combination, a sort of hybrid research method.

On the other hand, it is difficult to really get into depth on different research topics as there is a huge amount of information available and it seemed impossible to process all of it and research the topics more extensively. It was also though finding appropriate research methods and we may have spend too much time on finding them as they were not determined by the studio and therefore, stayed explorative.
After defining parameters, the master plan was formed. In order to visualize the master plan, we made a suprematist painting. This painting allowed us to reveal the true core parameters of the master plan design, but in the style of a collage as a prime graphic vehicle. We decided to no longer represent fake harmonies or formal compositions, but rather a new rule, or order, superimposed on the existing abstracted fragments.

This non-objective style with its simplification of form allowed us to interpret the city as an empty space and to visualize parameters into an abstract design. It offered the possibility to be specific at certain points, to articulate ideas, but still allowing the freedom to interpret the painting as an abstract subjective drawing. Although it may seem only as a piece of art, the painting proofed to be an abstract architectural tool. Every line on the painting has a meaning, thus the painting was a coherent step between analysis and urban design. The painting proofed to be a good way to ground floating ideas and form the foundation from which a project can be developed.

Furthermore, the project aims to reconfigure the image of the city center by inserting a longitudinal element. A linear project: a new fragment that spatially reorganizes its surroundings. It breaks and reassembles. It is blunt, straightforward, explicit, up front. It represents what it presents. No decoration. No crime. No ornament.

The initial idea of the longitudinal element was the most important aspect of the master plan. Although its clear longitudinal character has blurred a little bit in time, due to design decisions, there still is a very strong and outspoken structure that is holding the whole intervention together. This connecting structure is the most important part of the design – from master plan to architecture, to human scale, to the scale of detailing.

As the initial idea was a five-hundred meter long intervention, the question of how such a mega-structure could be a homogeneous element or that it should be constructed of a series of independent areas rose. This question was very interesting to make the jump from the top-down master plan approach to the architectural and human scale, jumping from a painting without context to a built urban setting. Switching from scales sometimes lead to breaking rules, but never at the expense of the main urban concept.
The building is anchored to Jacobsplaats by designing a particular structure through which the building is rooted. The intervention is (part of) a mega-structure based on a continuous grid, which is partly filled in with different programs. In a way it’s challenging the existing situation, as well as respecting it.

In the master plan we introduced four contextual atmospheres in the area, each having a particular identity. Appendages pop out of the linear backbone of the intervention and are acting as ‘in between elements’, rooting the longitudinal intervention into its context.

The structure is also dealing with today’s realities, also on a slightly bigger scale. The Hofbogen project for example, located north from the designated design area is considered to be the future High Line of Rotterdam. This intervention proposes a connection to the Hofbogen project, connecting the city center of Rotterdam with its peripheral residential areas. Also, the intervention aims to give back the importance to the market area as the historical core of the city. The project is right in between those important parts of Rotterdam.

In the phase of design, I found the help of the 3D-model very helpful in getting to understand the architectural quality of such an immense intervention. Whether you make it digital or physical, a model allows you to see the impact of the design decisions you make through the perspective of the user. Switching scales, or angles makes it easier to also consider your thoughts on the human scale.

Furthermore, an alternative programmatic cluster is planned with new programs ranging from a spa and several sports facilities to spreading eco-friendly practices such as urban agriculture and organic food shops. All the programs are chosen within the theme of ‘healthy lifestyle’, which does not compete with other districts within the city center but adds a new quality or rather a destination point in it. Thus, the intervention becomes (the heart of) a new fragment within the city of Rotterdam.