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COURSE
ARSAR111 Heritage and Architectuur

GRADUATION PROJECT
Airey-Strip - Amsterdam

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RESEARCH VS DESIGN

Out of the analysis the starting points for my design are formulated by determining the strengths and weaknesses. After doing a total site analysis I have mainly focussed on the facade and the floor plan of the Airey-Blocks. Those two aspects has formed the base of my project. The reason for choosing the facade in combination with the floor plan is because both aspects contain a weakness as well a strength and are related with each other. The facade is quite boring because of the repetition of windows and consistence but contains the main construction. The floor plan doesn’t meet today’s requirements, the apartments are to small, but have the benefit that all division walls can be removed to create a totally new interior design. The question I have asked myself during the phase of translating the research into a design is: What would I like to change or retain at the building blocks and why should it be changed or retained?

My research has shown that by a division of ‘support and ‘infill’, the open building theory of John Habraken, will extend the lifespan of the building. This division is already rudimentary present in the Airey-blocks. The support is the façade and the infill is the free floor plan. I have used this strength and opportunity as starting point for my redesign of the Airey-strip whereby I’m improving the floor plan of the building blocks and whereby also the cultural value of the façade has been taken into account by keeping the existing elements with potency.

A free floor plan gives the opportunity to change the dwelling-typology of a building. There is a big need of townhouses in Amsterdam for young couples and starting families. The Airey-Strip is perfectly suitable for this purpose. Next to the free floor plan, the building blocks consist of three layers and are located in a green area. The first design step I took was to change the dwelling typology from apartments into townhouses within the building envelope by keeping the existing structure.
Accept for the architectural interior quality of the free floor plan caused by the Airey-System, there are other values of this construction system to define. It has largely solved the major housing shortage after World War II but it will no longer be applicable in future construction projects. Half of the Airey buildings are already demolished. This forms the second starting point. Keeping the existing structure and the concrete facade panels, which are related to the system and constitute the architectural appearance of the Airey-System. In the beginning of the design phase was especially paid attention to a new interior division within the existing facade. But taking into account the weaknesses of the building blocks also the improvement of the facade should be considered especially by changing the typology. The continuous concrete facade is perceived as boring. This problem statement forms the third starting point. Although the uniqueness of the Airey-system, because of the concrete panelling system, that gives stability to the facade columns, and has a rare appearance, the building need a more contemporary identity. Also the entries of the new typology play an important role in the facade.

The three starting points are combined in the design concept. Keeping the existing structure and façade panels with a totally improved interior. The interior consists of good dwellings that meet the requirements and wishes of the 21st century within the existing building envelope. The building envelope has a contemporary exterior identity but taking into account the cultural value of the facade. However in the beginning, I was focussed too much on the concept of flexibility. I tried to combine different theories on flexibility and to apply this combination to the Airey-Strip. Although the thematic research seemed to be an interesting design approach, the combination of different theories and creating my own theory, with not knowing what I was exactly looking for, was too much. Therefore I had to specify myself. By changing the focus from an only research driven approach to an architectural driven approach with the focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the building block, a more logical design was achieved. So actually after the research phase I focussed too much on applying the research findings about flexibility at the Airey-Strip instead of using the findings for a ‘good’ appropriate architectural design proposal.

**STUDIO THEME VS PROJECT THEME**

The overall theme of the graduation studio Heritage and Housing is the transformation and renovation of housing in historical inner cities. The assignment is to develop a new design for the Airey-Strip based on the cultural values on different scales.

With my design of row houses, a transformation of social housing into privately owned housing, I have tried to find what possibilities there might be for the transformation of monumental housing blocks into an other dwelling typology. For my design I used the elaborated findings of the site analysis on different scales, research and references.

The construction system with the associated facade panels of the Airey blocks are of historical value since it will not be applied anymore and therefore kept and restored. Because of this, the existing building envelope
The approach of the studio Heritage and Housing can be illustrated in a triangle fig. 1. Every corner of the triangle focuses on another aspect: architecture, technology and cultural value. Those aspects together form a research by design approach that concentrates on the transformation of the historical built environment. Research as well as design can be defined on all aspects and all levels of scale, trying to find the right balance between the old and the new.

A theoretical research and a site specific analysis provides a deep understanding of the origin, history and contemporary situation and should lead to the right innovation solutions. The design will be then an asset and a good example for future interventions of the existing housing stock. The first phase of my graduation track is similar to what has been described above. The site specific analysis gave me insight in the history and contemporary situation of the urban context, the building blocks, materialization and technology and changes over time. Thereby the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and treats could be formulated. For the thematic research I have chosen to use one of the strengths of the Airey-Strip and do a literature study with as main topic flexibility.

During the second phase, the design phase, I focussed mainly on the outcomes of the literature study. With this method the cultural value was almost forgotten. By asking myself the ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions every time again by making a design choice and writing this down, I’m trying to make a successful design with a logical story. Research and analysis should be both the beginning and base for the design and can help to increase the design choices. Next to this, very helpful is asking other people. With this method I forced myself to check every design step again.