

'The beauty of dereliction'

Designing with ruins and decay

Graduation studio

The graduation studio Explorelab within the master track Architecture offers students the opportunity to graduate in a topic which fascinates them and which does not suit in one of the other available studios. My fascination and project 'The beauty of dereliction' is about establishing a solid personal position towards this fascination in the field of architecture by creating a better understanding of a personal opinion on the topic and about expressing this personal position in an architectural design as a kind of manifestation. The topic is dereliction in the built environment. First, I would like to clarify my use of the term 'dereliction' related to the built environment as: 'abandoned places and structures which are deteriorating as the result of long-term decay processes', such as ruins and long-term vacant buildings.

Wider social context

The project 'The beauty of dereliction' aims to discover the values of decay in the built environment and can be seen as a response to the common Western cultural urge to resist and prevent every possible sign of ageing and imperfection. Personally, I do not share this Western view, wherein ageing is considered as something shameful and elderly are removed from society. Instead, my interest prefers cultural views such as many Eastern cultures wherein ageing, death and the deceased form an integral part of cultural life and wherein the elderly are highly respected instead of being disposed to retirement homes. Related to architecture, this common Western cultural rejection of ageing is reflected in the built environment, where every sign of decay is condemned as a design flaw or as the consequence of bad maintenance with the removal of the decay and the restoration of the architecture as a result.

A more specific example of a reflection of this Western view in the field of architecture lies in the common way in which is engaged with the preservation of historical valuable buildings, or monuments. These are often restored to a former historical glory which is considered as the most important phase of the building its history and of which many monuments have derived their value from by the minds of modern men. However, not all monuments were deliberately built as a monument, most monuments are unintentional and only have 'a certain meaning and significance, assigned by modern man, instead of value from the works themselves by virtue, of their original purpose'. (Riegl, 1996, p. 72) So why do these monuments have to be restored to their state in a certain period, as they were never intended to keep 'particular human deeds or destinies alive and present in the consciousness of future generations.' (Riegl, 1996, p. 69) Signs of age and imperfection which can reveal a monument its true story and history are rarely considered as valuable and the project 'The beauty of dereliction' is a response to this phenomenon, because instead of condemning imperfection in the built environment, I have in the contrary always been fascinated by signs of decay in the built environment.

The project intends therefore to shine a different light on the topic of decay in architecture and intends to give counter arguments for the negative perception of imperfection and decay in the built environment. My personal goal for this project was therefore to discover and formulate my own personal position towards age, decay and imperfection in the built environment and to discover why I find derelict buildings fascinating. The main goal of the project is to make explicit where the essence of the beauty of dereliction lies and to express and materialize this explicitly formulated personal view towards the beauty of dereliction in the form of an architectural design.

Planning, method and process

So, before I could start with the design, I had to do a research to discover my personal position. Therefore it was important to realize that the perception of (the aesthetics of) dereliction is a subjective and personal matter and that it was therefore important to collect a variety of viewpoints, so that my personal opinion could be based on a broad spectrum of ideas. Furthermore, there were two notions I needed to understand to come to this personal position, 'beauty' and 'decay'. Before I could formulate any explicit opinions on the beauty of dereliction I had to understand what the concepts of beauty and decay really mean, so I thought. For this, I studied existing views and descriptions of beauty and aesthetics in philosophy and eventually this

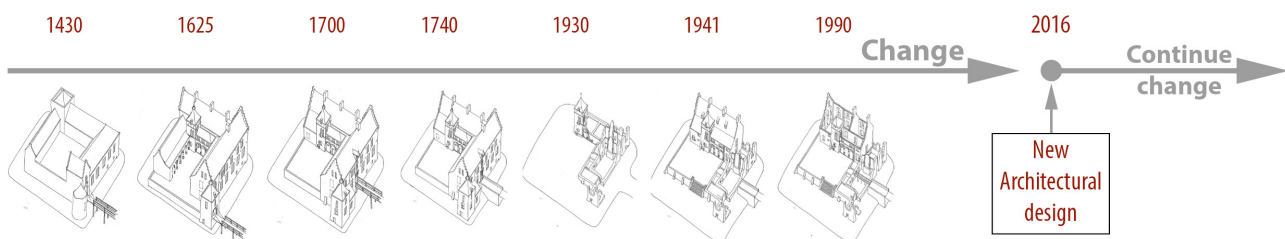
indeed resulted in a new insight related to the concept of beauty which helped me to point out where, for me, the essence of the beauty of dereliction in the built environment is situated.

At the beginning of the project I had planned to start the project with the development of my personal position towards the topic by means of a research and from there on develop a certain design strategy based on this personal acquired view. This design strategy would then act as the starting point of the design process. Now, when reflecting back upon this intended plan, I can conclude that the actual process did not quite follow this planning. Firstly because the three phases of: personal positioning, developing a design strategy and designing were not conducted one after the other. The actual process was not linear and the research and design 'phases' were overlapping each other. It was a bit naive to think that such a phased process would work, as designing itself is not a linear process, but rather an iterative one and also during this project I constantly critically questioned and reflected back on my own view towards the beauty of dereliction.

Furthermore, the initial intention of the research was to develop a kind of personal design strategy for designing with dereliction, based on the formulated personal position, which would act as a starting point of the graduation design, but the actual process went differently. The result of the research (the strategy) could not be implemented as a kind of 'handbook', that, if followed, would result in a design process beneficial for the aesthetics of decay and age in architecture. Instead, the result can be described more as a set of considerations which are important to keep in mind when designing with dereliction. Two of the main reasons for this different outcome are that all the with dereliction in the built environment related values are intertwined and dependent on each other and the other reason is that any design task is just too much related to and dependent on the unique conditions of its location and context, that it is unwise (or unable) to follow any kind of general design strategy.

Product

The design at the location of the ruin of the Asten Castle resembles my personal, during the research, established comprehensive definition of decay. In summary this definition states that decay is a process and can only occur in time. Decay is not the result of a process, it is the process. Furthermore this process of decay is defined as: 'The work of nature through time' and in my opinion this process of decay is not only about deterioration and decline (which is the common definition of decay), just as important is that decay is also about a process of growth, as without growth there can be no decline, because all matter and energy in the universe are constant. This definition of decay, time, process, decline and growth is captured in the design its concept. Where the existing ruin continues to decline and the architectural addition consists of a part which grows is the form of 'nature's work over time'. Additionally this concept is a reaction on the most valuable aspect of the ruin, as in my opinion, which is the ruin its long history of change. This history of change does not stop with the by me designed intervention. The design rather celebrates this history of change and makes sure it continues which can also be considered as a response to the earlier described existing common engagement of restoration monuments by replicating.



During the whole process of this project my view towards the topic has been tested and altered, but never did I lose my opinion that there is indeed beauty and value in decay and imperfection. I am therefore pleased that I could express this conviction in a design which in itself is a reflection of this personal view. I have found it highly interesting to express my personal view through designing. It was for me the first time that I had such a strong opinion on a topic related to a design task, it was also my first time to use the actual design as an expression of this view, my first time to use a strong personal position as the starting point for the concept of a design and my first time to use the design as a response to a common view in the field of architecture and in a wider social context. It was therefore that I did not only felt as an architect or designer during my graduation project but also as a kind of critic, which I greatly enjoyed, especially the discussions that were evoked by this project between my mentors and fellow students and the attempts to convince them of my personal position were enjoyable.