Reflection

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Graduation project

Theme: Adapting 20C Heritage
Title: De Beursgebouw
Location: Almere, The Netherlands
Tutors: Wouter Willers, Ger Warries, Marie-Thérèse van Thoor, Bas Gremmen, Lidwine Spoormans

The graduation project attempts to discuss the possibilities of transforming De Beursgebouw located in Almere, the Netherlands. Although it is the first built office building in Almere-Stad and remains in a good condition. De Beursgebouw has been vacant for 10 years since 2008. O.M.A’s master plan redefined Almere’s office zone in 2004. The attacking masterplan (Rem Koolhaas) isolates the building spatially with the rest urban environment. The continuous development of building technology also means that De Beursgebouw’s original energy devices unable to fulfill contemporary sustainable demands. The main propose of the project is to discuss the potential of De Beursgebouw and the possible way of transformed buildings to shape city development.

Research method

When I look back at the previous learn processes, certain valuable experience leap to mind. First, a careful and dedicated research is fundamental for the entire designing process; specifically, it is radical for the design strategy. And a clear overarching question is highly required to lead the research. Second, more research data, specifically the first-hand materials, can benefit the research process. Comparing and analyzing both the first-hand and second-hand materials has helped me make a clear research conclusion and a logical design concept. The following conclusions are the basis for the conservation and conversion.

Research and design

From city level to building fragment (technology), the scope of research narrows down
during the learning process. Different levels of conclusions are inferred progressively to promise coherent design. The research objectives of De Beursgebouw became clear during the learning process of heritage perspective.

The research objective of the first phase is to understand the history, the architectural function and the role of the De Beursgebouw. More importantly, the research explores whether and why it deserves to preserve the De Beursgebouw. I have analyzed all the data and concluded the values, characteristics and potentials of such a historical building. And they became the foundation for the following architectural design process.

How and to what extent to offer a better future for the De Beursgebouw was the main theme of the second phase. The research focused on the aspects of both physical and moral. Today’s architecture should not only be an interpreter of an architect and her/his time, but an important statement for sustainability as well. Therefore, I think my projects should firstly reactive the abandoned De Beursgebouw; and more importantly, it could be an engine which brings prosperous to the Almere City. However, the lack of understanding of the living habits of the target group (professional artists) resulted in space without artistic atmosphere.

The third phase was mainly to explore specific approaches to the new programs (art colony and information center). Referring to the feedback of the second phased, I realized that understanding the uses’ demands is necessary. In ordering to figure out artist’s lifestyle and their demands, I did a second-round literature review of numerous papers and reports, as well as watched the old movies and interviews. But I discovered these reviews were not enough because the authors were mostly interviewers instead of the artists themselves. I was urged to collect more first-hand materials. With the help of tutor, I fortunately visited the local artist colony in Rotterdam and interviewed several professional artists. It was the time for me to gain a deeper understand this group. Simultaneously, I went to an art academic named Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. Talking with the students of the academy did give me a lot of inspirations of the project. Thus, field research can be a prominent way to understand the user group. This approach was later applied to the study of space prototypes as well. For example, the design of the house type is engaged with my own living experience; the arrangement of the galleries has considered the feelings from my friends and me. Field research allows designers to predict the real effects from their design.

In the fourth stage, the scope of research continuously narrows down. The research objective is to figure out the practical ways to fulfill the users’ demands within limited conditions. The research looked back and returned to the building itself. It continued to explore the potential value that the building could be further utilized. Meanwhile, the research started to focus on building technology, exploring specific construction measurements. I have learnt more construction methods from the observations of the continuous field trip and self-studies. But it is hard to guarantee data’s accuracy. In order to understand the real construction process, I put a lot of efforts to the manufacturer’s
website, such as searching for similar projects, and finding out the products which they used. Finally, I chose one method after many comparative studies. Such an approach made my design more practical.

**Consideration and diplomas**

Making an architecture is a complicated process. It requires deep understandings of the local situation to make the subsequent design more realistic and feasible, specifically the local urban form, architecture, and people’s everyday life experience. And it is necessary to choose the appropriate research methods, such as literature review, field trip & interviews, and sketches, to explore, analyze, and finally understand the local situations.

Meanwhile, I have discovered that strategically combining various learning methods can improve the learning process, especially when these methods have created synergy. In previous study, I prefer a way of "thinking by making". The pro of such a method is that I can quickly see the outcome of my choice. The con is that the outcomes are uncontrollable/unpredictable. It may cost you a lot of efforts, going back and forth of your research, to finally work out a satisfying outcome. With this method, I obtained a lot of information and feedback in the early stages. However, only parts of the research results were instructive for design. Thus, I subsequently started to collect all the information and to consider every detail before designing. Obviously, it had made the design more logical. However, it may cause a delay because not all research can immediately have conclusions. Though both of these learning methods are not perfect, it is crucial for me to find out a sweet point when these two methods could work synergistically to maximize the result.

The one-year graduate project with the Heritage & Architecture Studio (HAS) has enriched my sights on architecture conservation. As a student from China, where the landscape suffused with both the most recent experimental architectures and the numerous abandoned historical buildings, I have always been keen to find a balance between old and new buildings, moreover, to explore how to define this balance. The HAS has offered me a huge platform to figure out how and in which manner to preserve the original essence of the building and realize its greatest potential. Many Chinese architects may have their own new interpretation to the heritages in the built environment, and there must be a situation when their willingness conflicts with building’s original conditions. And I hope when that day come, I could use what I have learnt in the HAS to make an example.

Thought the graduation design is nearly coming to the end, I will continue these thinking process. I believe the way of thinking and analyzing, which I learned from the Heritage & Architecture, can always help me make reasonable evaluations and find sustainable future for more buildings in the near future.