Little Urbanity

Creating a monastic care settlement for people with dementia

Rethinking Roosenberg

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The aim of this document is to reflect on the past year of graduation, in terms of research, design, themes, approach and its relation to a wider context.

A highly appreciated piece of architectural history will become vacant in the coming year; a proposal for re-use is needed. Designed by Dom Hans van der Laan, the architectural piece is one of the few pieces the monk/architect has created in his life. Its specific architecture language is a highly appreciated piece of architectural history. The traditional architectural style of Roosenberg is part of, and the start of the Bossche School. To understand the assignment, it was needed to create a framework of references to study, understand and integrate these into a modern architectural graduation proposal. Excursions and analysis in the first semester of graduation were made towards Brabant, where the Bossche School mostly made an appearance. Typical about the architecture of the Bossche School is its use of materials, proportions and relation with its surroundings; themes relevant to study when starting the design of an addition to Roosenberg.

As its current function of a functioning monastery will change, there is a question of how to re-use such a building. The combination of a monastery and care environment could be made. Adding a care environment could be a continuation of a historic combination, made with monasteries. As the designs for current health care institutes quite frequently are a result of rules and conventions added on one another, they lack a certain pleasant homely atmosphere. The extension to van der Laan’s Abbey asks for a perspective on atmosphere and eye for detail. I proposed myself the question to think of a health care institute that presents itself as a home, within an ensemble that feels safe and recognizable for people with dementia. As many recent Health Care Institutes lack the attention and patients of an architects work, a lot can be gained in this field of architecture. The growing need for housing people with care, in a world of aging people, asks for a new way of thinking. The proposal for extending the Roosenberg Abbey shows a way to create a care home in the generous landscape of Waasmunster, a specific site, problem and solution. Perhaps a solution only possible within the freedom of a graduation plan. Proposing a solution to the current problem of institutionalised care homes.

The theme of the Bossche School and the theme of a Care Home for People with Dementia are part of the graduation studio. Within the guidelines of these themes I created my own fascination.

An anthropologic research is proposed by the graduation lab to start the design process. To investigate the relation of a person with its homely environment, the ensemble and the surrounding nature, I have visited the Weg der Weegen (The road of all roads), a historic road within the surrounding forest of Zeist. This location houses many large institutes within the forest, as ‘care villages’. Large remote places, built around 1900, creating a place to live, heal, rest, socialise and all other aspects of daily life. After visiting these places and perceiving its peculiarities, to understand how people live in a care ‘village’, I created a framework of elements to construct a design principle to work with. Seeing the Roosenberg Abbey as the start of a settlement, which can become a small village within the forest of Waasmunster. The three care villages I have visited showed me different relationships with nature. The loose set up of my research, allowed me to perceive and react. The initial attempt to study how people would use the public space within the forest or parklike surroundings, shifted to understanding the borders of the domain.

Besides the idea of creating a small urbanity from the perspective of the future user I see a possibility to study the typology of a monastery. Part of the methodical line of the graduation lab is to see typologies as a base for creating designs. The monastery is an object to be built upon. I have used historic examples of ensembles with a specific urban or architectural language. I have analysed different monasteries, as precedent analysis, by means of drawing and building models. Understanding the monastery as the start of a settlement and the start of a commune, and reflecting on the idea of using these elements for a care home separated from the village.

From these analysis I was able to create an architectural mass surrounding the Roosenberg Abbey, creating a small ‘care’ urbanity, as an informal settlement, inspired by monastic domains. These methods gave me something to hold on, as the surrounding forest gave endless freedom.
The elements as described above became the base for my graduation.
- Bossche School
- Care Home / Care Village
- Typology of a Monastery

When formulating the problems and challenges of the assignment, elements started to coincide. Question marks formulated by the assignment were answered by studies done on fieldwork, or visa versa. The design was built up by these different research elements. Noticing that the research studies I executed gave me restrictions and possibilities within endless freedom given by the site.

The architectural language of my proposal highlights one specific aspect of a monastery, in a completely different way. The settlement I create reflects on creating a place focussed inwards, I create a closed walled ensemble as a monastery is usually set up. A monastic building would usually be faced inwards as well, with a cloister hallway surrounding an inner garden, a walkway for peace and quiet. By taking this architectural element, but turning it outwards, I try to create an architecture that would relate to its surroundings at all time. An exterior space attached to its façade creates a covered outdoor space, to enjoy nature as fully as possible. The building invites you to step outside by all means. By intentionally placing all common functions within the monastery, a highly active domain is created. People with young dementia would benefit from this possibility.

During one specific site visit a few people with young dementia were invited to look around at the Roosenberg Abbey. A remarkable observation was the constant need to being outside. The question of having a smoke, or going for a walk, came every few seconds. So I used this quest as a design strategy. The different buildings separately are intended to become a little urbanity. The intention is to create the feeling of being part of a community, in a way that your home would have a view towards a settlement, where you would see movement and excitement.

The architectural language relates to the Bossche school, as a sturdy, grounded architecture, an architecture that becomes part of nature. By using similar materials, I try to learn from the Bossche school, but interpreted it differently. The outer frame would not be made by bricks, as a typical Bossche school element, but with rough pre-casted concrete, finished with a rough exposed aggregated touch. A step further you are introduced to a brick wall, which is capped with a large concrete lintel, to create large horizontal lines. The interior follows the roughness of the outside, within the common spaces, more and more wood is introduced when finding your way towards the apartments.

The three elements of study, have found their way throughout the design. I tried to relate my architectural proposal to a monastic settlement, on an urban and architectural level, keeping in mind the way of doing of people with young dementia, and my vision of creating a small urbanity, as a way to feel part of a community.

Thank you.

Leonie