The track “The Place of Work” focuses on the redesign of a ministry office building in the Hague, which locates at the side of the central station and is a sort of entrance to the city center. This building is planned to host two ministries – the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment and the Ministry of Foreigner Affairs - after the refurbishment. The aim of the studio is studying the place of work in this building and its relation to the public realm.

By writing this reflection paper, looking back on the start of my project and rethinking of my design ambitions and strategies are made. In the following chapters I will reflect on three aspects which are the relationship between research and design, the relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method I chose, and the relationship between the project and a wider social context.

Aspect1: The relationship between research and design

The research phase took the first several months of the gradation project, in which we studied the site of the project, visited three ministries in the Hague and surveyed on the opinions about the working place from the civil servants working in the two ministries which will move into the project building. Besides, with the studio we also visited a number of office buildings in Madrid and studied some office buildings from the 1920s to the 1980s.

Through this research, two aspects are attractive to me. The first one is the willing to be more open. On one hand, in the questionnaire survey I did in the two ministries, most candidates expressed the willingness to share their work with the public online (or other ways) and actually now they already had many meetings with the public. Furthermore, the ICTs make it possible to work outside the office. The work in ministries become less and less “mysterious”. On the other hand, the current VROM building is isolated from the city to some extent. The closed ground floor separates the ministry from the public and people use the building just as a passage between the train station and the city center.

The second one is about the loss of the sense of orientation in modern office buildings. The over homogeneous layout of office plan could make people feel nowhere in the building. Because everywhere are the same, they could not sense the difference of the surroundings, even though they are actually moving in the building. In the VROM building, five same wings are used as the major working place and are only connected by a central spine. In this situation it is hard to feel where I am and which wing I am in.

Based on the research on these two aspects, my design ambitions are: increasing the
openness of the building to the city and to the public; and creating a sense of placeness in the building.

Aspect 2: The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student in this framework

After the near-one-year studying in my graduation studio, the methodical line of approach concluded by myself is:
1. research
2. possibility exploration
3. concept and organization
4. atmosphere of key spaces
5. how to construct that atmosphere, which is about materialization and building technology.

In general, I think I followed this methodical line. In each phase, the method chosen for design is changed accompanying the different tasks. When doing research, our work was mostly about collecting and processing information, so computer-based working was the main method at that time. In the next phase, model working is involved. Site model and some 1:500 models were made to explore the possibilities for changing the current situation of the building. To set my concept and to design the organization for the whole building, I used some sketches, diagrams and combined the 1:500 model I made before. Then, while designing a series of key spaces, I used both model making and computer working. The model working is for the city lobby and partial visitor core, which are the center of my project. Making model takes time but has a better performance on testing spatial atmosphere. For the other key places, for instance, the upper floor of the visitor core and some formal and informal working, meeting places, I worked on computers to do some digital models and collages. When thinking how to really build that atmosphere, images plus detail drawings are the method I used. The images is used to show what kind of atmosphere I want to achieve and what are the materials; the detail drawings are for the explanation of the construction of that spatial atmosphere.

Aspect 3: The relationship between the project and a wider social context

The social background of the project is the changing mode of production caused by the developing social system and technology. From the period right after the wartime to the era of globalization, in most places in the world, the administration of countries is altering from the power politics to power decentralization. The pillarization in Netherlands is a well-known example for the power decentralization, which deeply influences the public relation of government institutions. In this background, at the level of ministry, the openness in both administration and working is an important aspect for me while designing the new office building. The open ground floor and the visitor core running through the building in vertical direction come from this consideration. Besides, the developing ICTs have a dramatic effect on
the way of working. On a global scale, the headquarters of a corporation and its production department could be in different countries. On the scale of our daily working, far-distance working is being known and accepted by more and more people. The place of work is melting into everywhere and office buildings play a more and more important role in meeting. Its influence on my project could be seen in the consideration of the ratio between the place for working and the place for meeting, and in the strategy of increasing communications by a horizontal spread layout and vertical function packages.

While I am doing the research and designing, a question often comes to my mind. Why is this degree of openness still too high in China? In the past thirty years, Chinese economy suffered a radical reform and the GDP nowadays is in the second place in the world. But the government administration, seems like, makes no differences from what it was thirty years ago. The power distribution and supervision, the hierarchy of government institutions and the voting system of People’s Congress have never made a progress as remarkable as the economy. Even the building of a city hall is still the same as what it was tens of years ago – an office building surrounded by an enormous yard and the entrances of the yard are protected 24 hours a day by guards. Administrators keep themselves far from the public and ordinary people are fear to say too much about politics. In this case, what is behind, or hidden by, this mismatch between politics and economy and will a colossus collapse because of this mismatch? This is my reflection.