Reflection of the VROM Project

At the beginning of the VROM project, I researched the design issue by observation and questionnaire. I went to the site several times, in daytime and night, in different weathers, aimed to find out what kind of quality the existing building contributes to the city, and how people use the original public space (the covered passage) in different conditions.

The public space is busy and narrow. The site locates in the central of Den haag, near the central station, at the start of the main street and besides a canal. It is a quite busy, with almost all kinds of public transport, trains, trams, buses, bicycles, even boats. But the public greenery is very limited, the street looks like a concrete forest. The canal, with small trees besides, which is the only natural landscape element in the area, but the existing building is very close to the river so that no more extra space left for public.

The city image is massive and remarkable. This part of the city looks quite developed, high-rise buildings around it, many of them designed by famous contemporary architects. Red bricks and heavy stones make up the appearances of them. I was stressful when I faced to these master pieces. Should I make a heavy solid to get in harmony with them, or, make something fantastic looks like a master piece to compete with them?

Neither of them. My attitude is change the object in a slight way while change the subject essentially. Specifically, the object means the existing building and the subject means the way how people use the building, and the inside and outside atmosphere.

The original space and circulation are boring and repeatable. For example, people are easy to lose themselves in the work space, and some important space such as cores and atriums are very narrow. I had a feeling that something exciting have to happen in the homogeneous system.

Then, I tried to find an extreme element to be added. This element should be as light as possible, but has multiple values in different aspects. I kept a large part of the old building, only removed two half spine in the middle (we defined the building as a fishbone with five spines), and then, added a long, thin and transparent strip volume to connect the two ends of another two half spines. As a result, a loop and a big atrium formed, which make the circulation and spatial experience dramatically changed.
Anyway, this is my target in this project. I knew it at the very beginning of the design process. Afterwards, stories happened in the process of achieving this goal. I tried many ideas to add values to the building, some of them success, and some of them failed. To be honest, in a long period time in the middle of the design, I was not very clear the atmosphere of some specific spaces, and I also struggled by the route from the entrance to the fourth floor (the main interior public floor). I addicted to making models, I spent months on it but it was not efficient. Until one day, Laura told me, hey Pei, you looks forget what your first wanted. And then, Mark described an image how the daylight move from morning to afternoon in the big atrium. Suddenly, I jumped out of models, drawings and all the tiny things, I realized that I almost lost myself in the design process. I think that was a precious moment in the project.

Architects should have abundant dynamic imagination for the future and always keep themselves awake in huge amounts of specific works for today.

After that, I started to define the project. I defined the building as two parts, the old part which is the original quality has to be kept, and the adding part which should be totally different to provide the main quality of the whole project. In addition, I made the building more and more concise, and deleted some unnecessary element such as the long entrance route. As a result, the building is so simplified that the extreme contrast part can be emphasized as strong as possible. Whenever I encountered issues, I would like to tell myself what is the crucial thing I need to achieve, then the solution can be much clear. However, I understood myself more deeply during this project. Now, I know the drawbacks of my design ability so I can enhance them consciously in the coming years.

I believe my design process is strongly followed to my original idea since the beginning of the graduation year. I learned useful methods for solving design issues and gained sensibilities for materialization. And I believe the reconstruction strategy can works quite well in the site, because it provides a beautiful covered outdoor space for general public, and, at the same time, a brilliant atrium for the civil servants. The building likes a big window that shows the inside activities, which makes the government more visible and transparent. When we zoom out, the transparent volume is a subtle, slight element between the massive, heavy high-rise buildings, it is not as shining as Michael Graves, but it has its own position. The facade, the alive people in facade, and the alive atrium behind the facade, consists an artificial landscape in the city. So, I think this project has its value in terms of public realm, social context and political symbolism.