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STUDIO THEME: TALL
TEACHERS: Henri Van Bennekom, Arie Bergsma

ARGUMENTATION OF CHOICE OF THE STUDIO: In order to obtain knowledge of designing a high-rise building within all parameters which is the best solution for land scarcity in metropolitan areas and its high value, intensifying land use in order to achieve maximum sustainability and revitalization of dense urban areas. In addition, high-rise buildings are urban landmarks with significant branding and commercial capacity. Coming from a country (Greece) where skyscrapers are a taboo, the opportunity to receive this elaborate architectural knowledge is unique and invaluable.

TITLE OF THE GRADUATION PROJECT: Westminster City Tall
Reflection P4

Introduction

The site for the graduation project is the area around the Westminster City Hall in London, which is one of the most successful areas. Due to the fact that most of London, e.g. Prince Charles, hates towers it is becoming almost impossible to build them. However there exist a fair number of tall buildings from the 50’s and 60’s that need massive upgrades. If one were to demolish them they would only get planning permission to develop a new building at half the height. Therefore preserving the tower becomes the only way to build a new ‘tower’. We are choosing not to ‘preserve’ an entire era, due to its lack of popularity. Mid-century modernism is perhaps the most important yet most hated era of contemporary architecture. If the conservation policy has its way, this entire era will be erased from history. Part of the P1 was to examine the site and determine which buildings to keep, remove and what to add to the WCH and how to deal with the sensitive view. Preservation is the critical component of the studio and became the very actual theme of the proposed project named Westminster City TALL (or how the Westminster City Hall became TALL). A skyscraper may have a strong aura, but its effect on the urban condition is usually negative: being a solitary type with most of its life taking place inside, it rarely contributes to the energy and richness of urban life. The intent of the High-rise workshop is to re-imagine the “next” skyscraper, not only in an architectural and technical sense, but also in an urban sense. According to the theme of the workshop, the team tried to develop a tower that did not merely serve as an artificial and detached icon, but engaged the city and served more as catalyst for positive growth. Yet, due to lack of time not all aspects were fully developed; on the following semester, I am given the opportunity to make a more elaborate research and take the project several steps further. The tower must evolve, as architects must reinvent the Urban Condition for the 21st Century.

Problem statement

The vast majority of towers - office or residential - are consisted of a group surfaces stacked around a central core. The last two decades architects try to rethink and reinvent the role of the high-rise building type resulting into innovative exterior designs of the towers, yet they keep neglecting the public space on the ground level around the tower. As this non-designed piece of land is strictly related to high-rise buildings more than any other low/mid rise building typology.

A research question that became a project

In this graduation project my design target was to create a better connection between the tower and its urban fabric, integrating it with the street level, in order to reflect its character and interact with all levels of the city in which they are built. This has been achieved with parallel research and experimentation in two stages, one on the design of the street level and the other focused on designing the new part (extension) of the Westminster City Hall.
On the street level the spatial experiments concerned mainly the human scale and the balanced relationship of the submerged plaza with the surrounding buildings, including the WCH and the new cultural building. The plaza should be deep enough in order to invite visitors to relax in a calm, urban oasis, away from street noise, but not too deep in order to create negative isolating atmosphere. This aspect should also be viewed through the interaction of the new cultural building in a way that the new volume would be welcoming and not working as a visual obstacle or casting shadows, on a dark, submerged plaza. In each of the numerous design approaches there have always been positive and negative points, yet the latest one occurred from the combination of the most positive points possible. The Westminster City TALL project has undergone a series of changes after the P2 presentation, yet the overall concept and guidelines were left untouched. All changes occurred due to the planned project detailing and development of its every aspect. After consultations on structural design the structural solutions concerning the connection of the old and the new WCH were reconsidered and reworked.

The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the studio and the method chosen by the student in this framework

The graduation project “Westminster City TALL” have been quite a different project compared to the previous TALL Vertical Cities projects as it introduced the new theme of preservation and renovation of old high-rise buildings together with the importance of the integration of new developments with the context they are in. Maximum height or spatial efficiency is not the most important target anymore since architecture has to face the current reality of recession and to find new ways of dealing with it. Despite the potential solutions of designing a single super-tall skyscraper to handle all required functions, a more humanistic approach with historical sensitivity was followed.

The relationship between the project and wider social context

The new development, with the introduction of the submerged plaza in combination with the cultural building and the new underground station is now playing a vital role in London’s urban fabric with a serious influence on the everyday life of the visitors and habitants (especially for tourists, this Underground is the closest one to the Buckingham Palace, therefore it will eventually turn into a busy spot).

Square & Public Spaces

The new square introduced inside of the plot becomes a vital recreational and transition point. Due to the set back (bellow) from the Victoria Street it is protected from the noise pollution and makes the presence on the square even more desirable in the context of the busy, tunnel-like Victoria Street. The square is an interpretation of public terrace within the urban tissue that invites visitors to explore it and benefit from a short-time stop to a long-hour visit. It also provides with the option of being turned into an open-air venue for live musical or theatrical performances, not very far from the famous theatre area of Victoria neighbourhood.
Time Planning / Project organising

The overall time planning of the graduation process was in general efficient, though there were some periods of severe brainstorming in order to overcome a perpetual backdrift to older concepts blended with new touches. The main issues were occurred at the design of the cultural building. Fragile balances concerning scale (human vs city) often got shaken when impressive, yet bulky buildings came up, which though they had interesting aspects, they also created a lot of problems to the plaza. Another time consuming procedure was the detailing & materialization approach of the WCH facade, old vs new building and how they would implement sustainable technologies within the challenging structure. The research on desired façade materials, their properties and possible implications took more than it was previously expected from the very beginning. The detail development itself was effecting large changes to the façade appearance within desired limits, since the new structure above the old one, required prefabricated, integrated facade systems which would be smartly placed easily on the facade, minimizing time and construction work load at big heights.

Conclusion

The context-guided/history-respecting design has shown its effectiveness in integration with the city. All primary goals set before the P2 have been reached and most of the ambitions achieved during the project development phases, especially the last 3 weeks. The spatial results that occurred provide lead to an interesting and innovative hybrid public space which is potent to ignite a new design approach concerning the combination of high-rise buildings and their ground level context.

Laertis-Antonios Vassiliou

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