P4 Reflection

Christiaan Fokkema

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Student name: Christiaan Fokkema
Student number: 1526464
Studio: Heritage & Architecture - Transformations in the historic center of Amsterdam
Teachers: Lidy Meijers, Jan van de Voort, Sara Stroux
External examiner: Gerdy Verschuure-Stuip
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Introduction
In this reflection paper, I will reflect on the process and design of the graduation year. The reflection consists out of four subjects. First, I will address the relation of research & design, followed by the theme of the graduation studio and the chosen subject. Furthermore, I will reflect on the chosen method and approach, ending with the societal relevance of the graduation project.

The general planning of the two past semesters can be divided into the first research semester, followed by the design semester. During the first semester, I wrote a thematic research report, combined with site analysis and a more specific analysis of certain themes and subjects related to the building or the project area. Based on these analysis, a building and program was chosen. The design phase however, starts already within the research semester. The P2 moment, at the end of the first semester consisted out of the research conclusions, but also proposed a first design solution. More importantly, a first architectural and urban concept was formulated. In my case, this concept was already a building design; a set of plans, elevations, sections and perspective sketches. Looking back on this design, I can say that only the fundamental ideas behind it were kept and remained relatively unchanged during the design semester that followed. This means, that certain design decisions were taken too fast, and changed quite a bit in the months that followed. However, I also expected them to.

The segregation of research and design in the two semester as I just described them is actually not a segregation. Only the first phase of the first semester did not involve 'designing', but I found out that I was already thinking about certain design ideas during the writing of the thematic research. The aspect of research was also quite relevant in the design semester, but did not contain for instance a thorough literature review of a certain subject, similar to the first semester. I will elaborate on the role and relation of both research and design during the past year in the upcoming part of this reflection.

The first choice of subject and method was formulated in the Graduation plan, which was submitted after the first six weeks of the first semester. This was a draft version, but my graduation plan did not change that much when it had to be submitted during the P2 moment. In this reflection, I will use the submitted graduation plan as a tool of comparison. Research questions, expected choice of method and the societal relevance were already formulated in this plan, and will be compared with the method and answers that my project contain so far.

In the graduation plan, I formulated my subject based on the first fascinations and observations. I observed that the site was very fragmented, and consists out of a layout of courtyards and 'corridors'. I expected that this layout resembles the former layout of the cloisters that were present before the Binnengasthuis area became a hospital and a university campus. The focus during the writing of the graduation plan was the public- and semi-public space based on these first observations. Some were used, some not at all. I decided to investigate why this is, and what architectural and urban characteristics could influence this use of public space. I therefore formulated the following questions:

What are the architectural and technical characteristics of public and semi-public spaces?
Why and how are they used? What are the target groups at the Binnengasthuis area?
What is the relation to the buildings & typology?
What is the relation of the spaces to the former layout of courtyards and corridors of the cloister and hospital buildings?
How can the unused public spaces be improved?
What is the role of public space within a university campus? What kind of public spaces does a University need?
The expected answer I formulated back then, described a more defined choice of a subject. “The answer to these questions helps me to define a set of principles for designing public space in both inside, outside and in between buildings. This provides a basis to optimize spaces for learning, encounter, relax and leisure in a newly transformed university building” [and] “The thematic research will provide me with architectural principles to design public and semi-public space, in order to optimize the encounter between students, teachers and researchers. Besides interior spaces, spaces in between buildings – the courtyards and corridors – are equally important within the mix of faculties, residents and even tourists”.

I described the goal of the graduation project as: “[....] to design a transformation in and around a building on the Binnengasthuis area in Amsterdam. The transformation is based on research and design, and has to fulfill the needs and future plans of the University and the City itself. The program of the transformation will be based on research and future plans.”

Based on the observations, questions and the goal of the project, I proposed a research focused on the following:

While exploring the site, both physical and through analysis, a few characteristics came to my attention. First of all, the overall impression of the urban layout I got, was that of a fragmented site. The site is constructed by a layout of scattered building volumes with different sizes and scales, intersected by courtyards, a square and accessed by small gates or underpasses. Two of the three courtyards in the Binnengasthuis area are completely surrounded by the building blocks. The remaining courtyard is constructed by a triangular building block, with an opening on the corner of the block. The fourth open area is the main square, and is located in the center of the area.

The only passage by its definition is the Oudemanhuispoort, located at the north of the site. The passage connects the Kloveniersburgwal and the Oudezijds Achterburgwal, but is closed after opening hours of the faculty next to it.

The remaining streets on the site are not passages by definition, but I perceived them as such. This could have something to do with architectural characteristics such as light, contrast and materialization. Also the dimensions of the street can play a role. The characteristics of both the passages, the courtyard and the square were further elaborated in a spatial analysis. To be able to reflect on the (semi) public spaces on site, I will elaborate a theoretic framework on the three named subjects: square, courtyard and passage. The subjects will be elaborated both from an architectural and an urban perspective. The goal is to gain a wide knowledge framework with different perspectives, so that a significant reflection on the site specific spaces can be performed.

Looking back, I wanted to know as much as possible from the three types, expecting to form a set of principles to (re)design and improve (semi) public both inside, outside and in between buildings. In the upcoming reflection, I will describe what role this expected research subject played during the past year, and to what extent I answered the research questions.

**Relation research and design**

As I described in the introduction, the segregation of a research semester and a design semester turned out to be invalid. There was no clear segregation of research and design. Although the first semester had a more theoretic approach, the design process also contained research. So what was the role of the research? In general, I think a design studio like this asks for a thorough analysis, like any other architectural project possibly. You start with an analysis, and end up with a building design. This analysis however, is also a thesis. A thesis containing a theoretic investigation in the three formulated subjects. I used the theoretic framework together with the site specific analysis, to come up with design directions. I can conclude that this combination - this comparison, lead to a choice of a building to transform, a program to integrate, and a set of architectural and urban principles...
to strive for. Research within the design semester was a secondary subject, and was focused on certain issues that became important for the design decisions. For instance a new facade, that is inserted in between, or as an extension of the existing building. Both an insertion and an extension, turned out to be very valid in my graduation project. I have to admit that the design of these facades turned out to be very energy consuming and it contained a large variety of architectural issues. The new facade asks for a thorough understanding of the existing building, the influence of the facade towards the city and the building itself. I forced myself to formulate a clear position towards the existing building and the new insertion. That way, I had to tool to reflect design options. Many options had to be assessed, finally ending up with facades that in my opinion fit the needs and expressions of the existing building. My position and the tool of assessment of facades, asked for research into facades in general, but in specific facades that are designed within an historic context. The method for research like this was the use of best practice or case studies.

The fact that I had to spent a lot of time on the facades, shows that an expected research & design process can change while you are actually drawing and designing on a building scale. My first description of research and the problem statement in the graduation plan is focused on the use of public and semi public space, but this subject slowly moved into the background during the design process of the building. I can also say that this subject moved more towards the building scale, not the site scale. Where in the first semester I wanted to improve for instance the main square, the second semester wasn't focused on the main square anymore. It turned out to be the public space of the ‘4th type’, the space in between the housing and the faculty. While the building design progressed, I reformulated this part of my design project. The 4th type was now the ‘leg’ of my building. An extension of my building towards the passage of the Oudemanhuispoort (or the other way around). The description of my goal of research formulated during the P2 turned out to be quite accurate and applicable.

“set of principles to (re)design and improve (semi) public space both inside, outside and in between buildings”

However, out of the three subjects (courtyard, passage, square), only the subject of the courtyard remained really important. I still consider the ‘4th type’, the ‘leg’ a passage, but the term passage turned out to be more of a metaphor of the design solution.

The subject of courtyard remained important during the entire process, both on a building scale, as on a site scale. The courtyard of my chosen building became more and more important within the architectural concept, the routing and the overall structure of my transformation. The courtyard on a site scale is projected on the sequence of three courtyards: the courtyard of the Oudemanhuispoort, the courtyard of the Mensa building (as a masterplan proposal), and the courtyard of my chosen building. This sequence however, also turned out to be more of an urban metaphor. I had difficulties in finding out what this sequence meant on a building scale, on the level of routing. I wanted to avoid a physical connection between the three courtyards, so I had to find out what the definition of this sequence was. In the end, the design of the 4th type is the main facilitator of this sequence. It is the main route and axis from the Oudemanhuispoort, along the Mensa building, towards the third and last courtyard of my own building.

A point of discussion during the P2 phase was the possibility of extending the sequence of three, to a sequence of four courtyards. The fourth courtyard, behind de Ley building block and the Allard Pierson museum therefore had to be included. This idea remained an idea, and I chose not to integrate it in the end. Maybe this could have been investigated more thoroughly. If I’m not mistaken, the design project of one of my fellow students does contain a design proposal for this fourth courtyard, also integrating access from the public space of the Binnengasthuis area. If I would combine his project with mine, the sequence of four courtyards might be present.
Following up on the subject of the inserted facades, the issue of old and new arises. Besides having to design an adequate solution of old and new, I also wanted to demolish and alter certain parts of the chosen building. This meant that my arguments and value assessment had to be strong enough to do so. An example is the demolition of a staircase block, on the corner of the triangular building. In the beginning of the design process, I was a bit in doubt of demolishing certain parts, because you have to be aware that you deal with a monument, and a part of history. If the staircase block could be removed, I was able to close the open corner of the triangle, making the building a courtyard block again, integrating the segregated courtyard into the building concept. I think that this solution significantly improved the building as an entity, and that this is more valuable than a staircase block. With every similar decision, I had to reflect back to my position, keeping in mind all the arguments of doing something. This meant that during the design process, the relation to my research and concluded principles remained present.

The research questions described in the introduction above have been answered for the most part. I have investigated the architectural and technical characteristics of the (semi) public spaces and made argued assumptions about the reasons for their use. Secondly, I found out why certain spaces are used less than others, so that I could integrate improvements within the design of these spaces. Furthermore, I defined the relation of the former cloister layout to the present layout, resulting in a position towards the design. My position towards campus and city was more segregated from the typological research of the three types, but turned out to be quite important in the design process. It lead to the fact that my building is architecturally focused on the inside - on the building itself - and not necessarily towards the city.

However, besides these research questions, other questions arose during the design of the building. How to deal with the facades? What is an urban facade? How can the new facades be integrated within the program, the routing, the city and the interior? What is the role of the dominant transformation of the corridor system? How can I improve the vertical relation in the building? How can I integrate the triangular courtyard within the design? How does the intervention of the 4th type relate to the transformed building?

I think these questions addressed the main issues during the design semester. The answer of the questions are design solutions, taken after assessing a lot of options regarding these topics. The topics were extensively discussed with my tutors and fellow students, striving for the most adequate solutions.

Heritage & Architecture and the project

The studio of Heritage & Architecture focuses on the design projects of the built heritage1. This can be interpreted in a wide context. Built heritage can be both a building or even an area as an ensemble. In the case of our studio - transformation in the historic center of Amsterdam - the subject focuses more on the ensemble, the site of the Binnengasthuis area. Although the current main function of the area is a university campus, we as students were free to choose a design program. The fact that the project area lies within the heart of Amsterdam, surrounded by the busy and dynamic life of the city, made the assignment look very interesting to me. I was interested by the complexity, the location and the fact that it was a university campus.

Secondly, we had to formulate most of our own design assignment. No specific building or program was given, giving us as students a lot of freedom in doing our graduation project. Not having a building or a program also means that you have to force yourself to really find out what the area needs and what kind of architectural solutions fit. This has a close relation to the theme of ‘tolerance of change’. Especially within the historic context that is the Binnengasthuis area.

I think my chosen themes of research and design fit the studio theme. By fascination and observation, I chose to investigate the historic and present urban and architectural aspects, hoping to conclude principles that help

me to design an intervention within this context. The tolerance of change in my case was very relevant because I decided to insert new building volumes between existing building parts. I also made internal changes to the building, as well as the surroundings. These decisions are not easy, and forced me to formulate a position strong enough to take certain decisions.

Looking back, I think that I have been quite conservative in terms of thinking and decision making. This statement is personal and I can only relate and compare myself to other group members. I chose to maintain the area as a university campus, stating that the campus is a city on its own - a house in the city. I think the campus does not have a strong relation, architecturally or functionally within the city around it, and should therefore also be kept that way in the future. This is also why I chose an educational program - a library and study center. Maintaining the campus is however not only a programmatic opinion. The characteristics of the Binnengasthuis area currently, show that the area is - and always has been - quite segregated from the city. Its facade, the borders, are quite closed, and the area is very quiet in relation to the city around it. I considered this as a big quality, and therefore stating that these characteristics should be maintained or even emphasized.

The main themes of the studio: tolerance of change, city as a campus and the user and the program, are therefor quite related and integrated within my decision making process and themes of my project.

**Method & Approach**

The method and approach of the past year can be divided into the given method by the studio, and my own method. Especially the method and structure of the first semester was quite fixed, and to my opinion also did not leave a lot of space for change. This is however also an advantage. In general, the first semester consisted of three analysis courses, each with a given list of subjects. A large part of the analysis was done within the student group. As a group we divided each subject among each other, defining a relatively clear structure of what had to be done. However, the course of the analysis process changed depending on the matter. Some subjects needed more attention than others.

Parallel to this relatively fixed analysis process, a thematic research was written. This research was personal, and everyone formulated their own subject depending on fascinations and observations. The early submission of the graduation plan forced me into thinking about the method I was going to use throughout the entire first semester. I also think this was the first time that I used a self defined method so strictly. The method I used to construct my thematic research is seen in figure 1. I made a diagram showing the process of my writing, the tools to be used and the expected conclusions. During the research, I found this diagram very useful in structuring the research. In past studios, I’ve experienced let’s say a ‘mental chaos’, especially during research quarters. By setting up this diagram early in the semester, I had a personal guide that helped me through the process.

In the graduation plan, I also showed a diagram regarded the expected design process. This expectation was based on the previous design processes I’ve had in studios. This method can be seen in figure 2. In the past 4 years of studying architecture, I can say that my design process was different almost every project. It depends on the structure of the project and on your personal progression. Because the masters education has become more serious than the bachelor, I also planned to pay more attention to my design process. But looking back, the design process can’t really be predicted. In general, the diagram is correct. The process was a series of small research-design cycles, each reflected upon each other. Design options are assessed, before moving on to the next subject. The next subjects were defined during sessions with my tutors, that could push me in certain directions of the design. I think the references to other projects or architects were the most valuable to me. For instance the projection of a work method of a specific architect to a building part was quite interesting. What happens when you design or draw a Dudok-esque composition in a public space? These small exercises lets you see your project in a different way.
I think that besides the small research-design cycles, the historic approach of the studio was very valuable to me. I have to admit that in previous design studios, I underestimated the value of an historical analysis. Now I see what underlying layers of history mean in future design project. When I study projects on websites or in books, I more and more see the way certain projects rely on historical information or characteristics. That really is different than how I looked at projects, say 2-3 years ago.

Social relevance and context
I think the studio of Heritage & Architecture has a valid societal relevance. The graduation project can be relevant in more ways. First of all, the general assignment of transformation within historic cities is a subject that is becoming more and more important, let alone transformation of architecture in general. The transformation of monuments and sites with much historical and cultural value is very complex. There is also no general consensus about how to approach these assignments. There is no right or wrong. This makes assessment of new additions
to a historic context quite difficult. My graduation project is another addition to the scope of transformation in a historical context. It shows another way, another example of how to approach the existing. Not in terms of uniqueness, my approach is not unique I suppose. It just adds to the general discourse of these transformation projects. In terms of function, it shows insight in how universities or educational complexes, can deal with cities and the other way around. I think that a campus is stronger as a cluster, and shouldn't be a mix of city, residential or commercial functions. The functions are not mutually exclusive off-course, but I think the clustering of educational functions in one area will work better.