P4 Reflection

A new Academic Library

Culture, Identity and Sociability in the Inner City. The University Library as a Public Retreat.
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20/02/2013
This is a reflection paper written at the end of my graduation project in the studio Interiors, Buildings and cities. It is now that the results of the research and design are available, I can reflect upon my approach leading to that. As requested in the graduation manual this paper focuses on 1) The relationship between the theme of the studio and the subject/case study chosen; 2) The relationship between the methodical approach of the studio and the method chosen by the student; 3) The relationship between research and design; and finally, 4) The relationship between the project and the wider social context.

1. On the relationship between the theme of the studio and the subject/case study chosen

The central question in our graduation studio is how the academic library can transform its latent potential to become the defender of a public retreat in a commercialized public space, where one can study (private) in public?

The themes that both the studio and the project addresses are that of the city, culture, that of architecture itself, the perception of space, that of building culture, construction.

2. On the relationship between the methodical approach of the studio and the method chosen by the student

The programme being a university library and study centre of almost 23.000 square metres needs to find a place in the city. In order to get to know the particularities of the city and the several proposed sites of which three inner city sites and one periphery site, to get to know how a new academic library can inform and enrich the site and vice versa, and to finally enable a choice for one of the proposed sites. We relied on the research methods within the frames of thought delivered by the typological and morphological episteme.

In a Research Seminar, related to the topics of the Studio and focusing on both the programme, the intended users and the specific location, led by Irene Cieraad (a cultural anthropologist) we conducted an extensive research within the frames of thought delivered by the anthropological episteme.

A lecture series offered by DSD provided us with the tools to position our research and design within the politico- and socio-spatial episteme.

The usage of the word “new” in the title: “A new Academic Library”, like any involving the word “new”, opens up an historical perspective. Therefore, the methods to design a new university library have been focussed on a close (historical) reading of every element of the new. By researching I learned about cultural, social, technical, and architectonic meaning of programme, organization, rooms, hallways, passages, columns, false ceilings, partition walls, gardens, glass and installations. This methodology of critical research enabled me to make thought-out and undogmatic design decisions.

3. On The relationship between research and design

Reflecting on the process of my graduation project I can conclude the following: I started with 1) a historical analysis of the city and site and 2) I tried to analyse conditions in contemporary society that are possible to critique or reflect upon by means of architecture.

The first one since I think that when the Italian architect Aldo Rossi said: "architecture is the making of the city over time" he made a very profound statement because it talks on one level about the individual production or the manufacture of an object, architecture. And it talks about architecture as being a form of cultural production, something that speaks to an issue, or speaks to ideas that are bigger than the sum of the parts of the building. And it relates it to the city and it also suggests that it is a constant dynamic changing process. I believe that every new project added to that city should reflect upon the city it is part of in its broadest sense. The project after construction becomes a part of the city and will form a part of the identity of that city.

The latter since I strongly believe that every good architectural project is a scenario that reacts on contemporary culture.
Out of these two first introductory fields of research I then came up with my research and design proposal. Out of 1) came the preoccupation with the Crystal Palace and the notion of a palace as an important public building that has the capacity to transcend the scale of Amsterdam; Out of 2) I distilled the notion of glass as a way of expressing an ever more transparent society caused by the information and communication revolution that is also directly influencing the typology of the library as we know it. Combining the two made me propose to design a Glass Palace. With its programme being a university library the research question implicitly became: “Is it possible to design a university library as a glass palace?”

By designing within this specific field of research defined by the research question it gradually became possible to answer that question. Not necessarily with a simple yes or no but with a scheme of which I think it answers the question positively. When academic research is conducted other researchers in the field have the possibility to test the outcomes, critique and react upon it. The beautiful thing about architecture is, that in its built form it is up to the user and the citizens to test and decide whether the built project answered its research question positively and whether that resulted in a building where people can work, study, read, and think private in public in a public retreat (or a public interior if you like) and whether a building is added to the city that is convincingly used and situated within culture.

4. The relationship between the project and the wider social context.

Society is more individual then ever before. In plan the project functions as a social condenser. Intentional overlapping and intersection of programme and space for circulation by means of organizing the different programmatic cells encourages dynamic coexistence of the different members of the academic society.

Society is more transparent then ever before. Information and communication technology has changed the way we work, study, read, and think private in public. In section the project reflects this condition by experimenting with a scheme that leaves out material partition walls and offers a complex visual field of study, reading and being together.

The project presents a public building that makes public life visible and apparent in the city. Not only by its sheer transparency but also by its meaning as an important public building. As a palace it ads to a series of likewise events: The Palace on Dam square, the Rijksmuseum, the Central Station. Even in times of crises we should not forget to build the monuments of our time.

I believe that a good architectural project is a scenario that reacts on its social context. The project can be read as a critique or a consolidation of conditions in contemporary culture. Architecture can be both a way to analyse the existing situation and a way to expose yet unknown worlds. Regarding this potential the projects relevance lies in the fact that it will not only be an architectural translation of current cultural and academic transformations taking place, but also an impetus to new and unexpected connections between city and building, between public and private, between student and citizen.