Reflection Paper

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Heritage & Architecture – Cultural Identity & Heritage
Introduction

This reflection paper is based on the graduation project of Yoran van Dalen. The project is situated in the inner city of Amsterdam on the Binnengasthuis complex. This location is characterized by the enclave of former hospital buildings and is nowadays inhabited by the University of Amsterdam. This central place in Amsterdam has a long history, which is still visible as of today. The project is part of the track Heritage & Architecture and the graduation studio focusses on Heritage & Cultural Identity.

The relationship between research and design

During the first part of the graduation project the focus is on a research, which will be generating starting points for the design. An important aspect of the research has been the creation of a value assessment that helped to determine the design conditions. A value assessment is considered as an important research tool in the track of Heritage & Architecture. The research gave a lot of useful insights and is a solid base for the design. The interaction between research and design during the graduation project could be improved. In the first semester the research dominated and the focus on the design was minimal. If the design phase started earlier during the period dedicated towards research, the relationship between research and design would have been improved. As a result it would have specified the scope of my research, which was too generic at the start. During the research phase the research question has been adjusted, although it remained a struggle to connect the research with the starting points for the design.

The research provided feedback and arguments for the design, although these starting points are only used at the start of the design process. The theme of the research was the impact of the 1980’s on the built environment and the cultural identity of the Binnengasthuis. Based on the value assessment and the design strategy I demolished the Eighties intervention of the chosen building. This decision has been an important moment in the graduation project, because this approach did barely allow a continuing relationship between research and design.

In the design phase there was a lack of interaction with the performed research, resulting in a loss of direction for the design. Designing itself is researching on a predetermined topic; since I was missing an overall concept in the beginning the scope was too broad, just like the research. The design assignment was unclear, because the design conditions were not well-formulated enough. Reflection during the design process is essential to remain critical on all the proceedings. I realized the design direction was not correct and the interaction with the research needed dramatic improvement. In retrospective this moment may have been the most influential for the graduation project, because the design assignment was finally clear, the appropriate concept is found and the interaction with the research is restored and strengthened.

If I would redo this graduation project the approach would be different to allow more interaction between research and design and limited the barrier between the two. I would start
designing in an earlier stage of the process and allow the research to continue during the design. Also there would be more emphasise on the research since I underestimate the impact of the research on the design.

Illustration 1 – The structure of the Research leading to a design assignment

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

I have done all the projects provided by Heritage and Architecture in both the bachelor and the master phase during the study at the faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment. This made me well acquainted with the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab. The crucial theme of this graduation lab is the link between old and new with the inherent cultural values. The (RMIT) method is followed in which the value assessment is an important component, to help determine design conditions. To my opinion the relation between the value assessment and the design could be enhanced; this is also influenced by the attitude regarding intervening in an existing context. The design approach for this project is a clear distinction between old and new by the use of contrast for the new intervention on the one hand and a dialogue between old and new on the other. This approach generates a certain tension in the design. It has been a major struggle to find an adequate balance of the focus between new building volumes and interventions in the existing building context. In a way the Heritage and Architecture philosophy is neglected for a moment in the design process, by merely positioning the viewpoint on the new additions. I was able to restore this balance during
the project; however some opportunities are missed.

The first aspect is the importance of the value assessment and the compliance of this tool to formulate design conditions. I believe a stronger interaction between the value assessment and the design can revitalize more additional qualities on every scale of the project. Also the tension between the old and new interventions is the main purpose of this graduation studio; the design approach could have been more related to this force field. During the process I became more aware of the consequences of the design decisions, on all the different scales.

The relationship between the project and the wider social context

An important component of the graduation project was the influence of the masterplan on this inner city location. The approach for this former enclave of hospital buildings was opening up the location towards the inner city of Amsterdam, by introducing a central meeting place surrounded by public functions. In retrospective the approach can be questioned, did this location which was characterized by its tranquil character require my strategy of increasing the relationship with the inner city? With the knowledge gathered during this graduation project I doubt my concept, it is partly neglecting the existing qualities of the location. Creating a central public meeting place in the dynamic inner city of Amsterdam is not a necessity nowadays, since there are a huge number of existing functioning examples. This location is more suitable to become a sanctuary of tranquility within the busy inner city of Amsterdam, whereas it has functioned before in the history of this place.

It was a difficult process to create an appropriate public program for this location. It required an intensive study on possibilities and precedents, which took quite some time. The final program is a creative centre, a place for artists, creative entrepreneurs and the residents of Amsterdam. The goal is to make art and human expression better known and available for all the citizens of Amsterdam. In my opinion if a subject is understood better you can appreciate it more and relate yourself to it, the creative centre requires a wide public support to function well. A limited variety of target groups and usage of the building can decrease its impact, so the program is vulnerable.

The new masterplan and building program of the graduation project can have a strong social impact; however this is only the case if a wide amount of preconditions are met. Multiple different scenarios could have been created for the location to explore all the possibilities, although that would require a lot of time.

All in all I noticed that my process was turbulent. At the beginning I had difficulties with the scope of the research and the connection with the design assignment. Also the location was complicated and the strategy for this location remains questionable. The study for a fitting program has been fierce and if the building will function properly remains uncertain. Furthermore the design has enormously evolved; it took a lot of time and effort to find the appropriate concept and approach for the new intervention. All kinds of design tools are used; especially models helped a lot to improve the design, as well as the use of alternative solutions for a design problem. The focus during the process has been sometimes too much concentrated on one topic, instead of several at the time. This caused me to lose control over my time planning. The P3 presentation has been a good wake-up call for me, from that moment I have been in control over both the time planning as my design. In the end there are a few design
topics which have been studied intensively, which are the volume and position of the new auditorium, the logistics and routing through the building and the materialization of the different spaces.

I used this graduation project to explore all the possibilities and boundaries in a reuse project once more. All the freedom which was require to achieve this goal is used, sometimes it may have been exaggerated and crossed the line but the tutors helped to stay realistic in a certain way. After an astonishing year of graduation I must admit I have developed myself towards a better designer, which makes me very content after all the struggles the process inherited.