Reflection paper

The new study environment
for UvA students at the Binnengasthuis"
My project is focused on creating a new study environment for the students of the University of Amsterdam located at the Binnengasthuisterrein in Amsterdam. With researching the functions within the university campus I created starting points for the reorganization of all the faculties and needed facilities within the Binnengasthuisterrein. After the scale of the campus research of the study environment and behavior of students created starting points for the study spaces. All the research is collected and after site analysis projected on the location with the University of Amsterdam as context.

The Relationship between research and design

Within the research I focused on different scale levels, from the university campus to the smaller scale of the quality of the study spaces. This created the framework for the design which could be used with the design of the new study environment of the Binnengasthuis UvA campus (fig 1.)

First of all, the site analysis and research of the campus in general led to the choice of a building and determination of the function. In addition, with researching the location and building scale formed my position of the strengths and potentials of improvements of the building. The strategies out of my research about dealing with an inner-city campus formed the first guidelines of information towards the design.

The first attempt of forming the program of the new study environment was formed by the existing plans of the University where other offices as Architectenbureau J. Van Stigt and Bierman Henket architecten were planning an university library within the same building I choose. Another inspiring source for the program came during the graduation from the demonstration last February where ‘UvA students’ occupy the Bungehuis as a protest against the influence and changes from the management and the current study environment of the UvA. First they mentioned the minimum amount of study spaces for students, especially around exam periods. And the quality of the provided places isn’t stimulating and when overcrowded doesn’t provide the quality the students need. The students are also mentioning the unique location and within their demands they want to emphasize the preservation of the identity of the site. In their opinion the characteristic buildings are just real estate to cover some extra costs.
To define the use of different types of spaces within my program, for example the library, individual study and group study, I could use the research about use of a library. Based on local research by the UvA and Hogeschool Amsterdam it’s what people do in a library and how long they stay there been a reason to study individual and group work can be divided into several categories, each with its own requirements and qualities. In the end the core of the design; creating a study environment for the UvA students at the Binnengasthuisterrein’ has become a collection of knowledge (the library facilities) study (study areas) and social (cafe). This trinity can be found within the design of the courtyard between the buildings ‘2nd surgical clinic’ and ‘Zusterhuis’ which connects all the functions. The complexity of all the functions within the network of spaces and functions is organized by the new design. This new organization creates clarity, connects people and makes it easy to find the right place for your study activity.

**Fig 2: first concept sketch, own illustration**

The main concept is that the existing courtyard is raised to the first floor; this improves the relation between the building heights and the inner courtyard (fig 2). Also the amount of sunshine during the day improves and the distance for the student studying at the higher floors to the outside and fresh air. The space under the courtyard is lowered and the double height creates clarity within the organization. When entering the atrium the connected functions are clear and easy accessible (fig 3.) The functions reflect the sides of the courtyard.

**Fig 3: Atrium, own illustration**
Design method and the relationship to the subject.
The design of a library at an inner-city campus is in other research often addressed by analyzing reference projects. Of course I have looked at similar projects and how it functions but this has not been the main structure of my research. For me, the challenge was more about finding an appropriate solutions within the existing unique context; how to maintain an existing building by means of adjustments and still serve to its user and especially his own character.
The Amsterdam historic inner city as context requires an approach that not only creates and preserves the picture of Amsterdam but especially preserves the existing (hidden) structures of the city. The real structure of a city as Amsterdam isn’t directly visible for the tourists but essential for the inhabitants to live and they keep the city alive. Amsterdam wouldn’t be this characteristic and unique without the locals, they live parallel to the touristic structure which is clear within the city, the real structure of the people is sometimes hidden.
Research and observation shows how inventive the ‘Amsterdammers’ are with protecting their own environment. The Binnengasthuisterrein is a good example of a hidden treasure within the heart of Amsterdam. Within the enclave of buildings with a rich history is the University of Amsterdam located. Only a curious person who deviates from the usual route discovers this unique location.
The method of designing is based on analyzing the existing, the title of our studio: ‘Heritage and Architecture’ also shows the focus of creating architecture within a heritage site. The existing situation must be the base of starting points with the focus of preserving the characteristics of the site/building and improve these within the wider social context and meet the current technical requirements.

The relationship between the project and the wider social context
Throughout the process it had always been my starting point not to base the design on the traditional definition of a library. New university libraries are nowadays more a place to study with books and information on the side then storage of books. Thanks to the Internet an unlimited source of information only 2 clicks away from each student. This position changed during investigation of the University of Amsterdam and especially the humanities faculty, which students attach more importance to physical books. This is because many of the valuable information is not yet available in digital form and from a book it is easier to read. Certainly the special collection of the University of Amsterdam is a unique collection whose value is too large to provide just digital. Within my project is clearly trying to find a balance between individual work with the accessibility of books centered and workstations are ideally suited for the new way of working, where students do not need more than the Internet, a power supply and an inspiring environment. This relationship between information source and processing information is an old concept (fig 4.) which is a re-interpreted within my design. A library in the center of the city also has a great social function for the residents. By creating unique and valuable information accessible to citizens, they also get the chance to broaden their knowledge.

Fig 4. Information and processing in one space at the biblioteca di sainte Genevieve.
Reflection on the process
Looking back at my process there are a few notable changes that have occurred during the process. After finishing the first half year it was time to project all the accumulated knowledge and principles on the location and form a design. Cause of the complex arrangement of the buildings chosen by me in conjunction with the function that had to be accommodated. I fell back in the for me familiar approach of working which results in a collection of design solutions without an overarching concept. Because of this finding during P3 presentation, I was reminded of the pitfalls that sit next to all the benefits of a technical education and several years of work experience. The comment by my supervisor: ‘Be not an architectural office but an architect’ woke me up and by creating overview of the problem and the possibilities my ideas evolved to a concept. This kind of twists in a process shows that you learn something but in my case I was behind on the planning. Even with knowing that my experience would help within the last phase and technical solutions of the design, it would be a challenge to finish the project within the nominal trajectory. Knowing the danger of thinking in solutions I focused on the developing the concept, this design approach is my biggest learning experience during graduation. Working out the various solutions within a self-imposed framework is also a learning process but it has insight into my own work method made me realize my strengths and especially improvements within designing.