Studio Public Realm - Rotterdam
Reflection upon the project

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2013 TU DELFT
Graduating in a team

In the studio of Public Building - Rotterdam, it is common to analyse and develop a masterplan together in a team of approximately four persons. After P2, starting the architectural design the normal routine is that every person develops 1/4th of the building and the four persons keep communicating and negotiating about appearance, load bearing structure, critical details when building parts meet. At the end they present their P3/P4 and P5 seperately.

In our case, the analysis was done in a team of four, at the moment of defining parameters for the masterplan the team intentionally broke down in smaller groups, two single persons and one duo. We continued intensively together, we designed, discussed, produced and presented from P2 everything together.

The collaboration

Of course it can be a tricky choice to graduate together on such intense level, but the decision to do so was based on enthusiasm and appreciation of each others portfolio, work attitude and aims for the graduation project.

Next to this we saw the supplementary capacity we could have for each other, which would be beneficial for the content and quality of the project.

We found out that we have a similar background: we both have next to educational experience also work experience (internships and part-time jobs). As relaxation we both appreciate to do sports - Job competes on national level in road racing cycling and Ignas plays for the university tennis team.

Supplementary capacity

Besides the common activities we learned in the past years at architecture schools we have individual specific capacities and interests we want to carry out through the project.

Ignas, having the background of Beaux-Art teaching method, experienced an extensive training in hand drawing and carries out a more artistic approach of designing and presenting. Next to this he is more free and has confidence in defining unusual programs, users, theory and concepts. His affection with The Why Factory and profound interest in architectural theory of, for example, Koolhaas and Tschumi creates a good background for the project.

Job worked during his education and his work at architectural office Cepezed on a big variety of projects, ranging from small houses to big public facilities, from quick short-time competition entries to drawing technical details. This knowledge gives the capacity to keep a good overview of the project on different levels: planning, efficiency, routing and the technical detailing.

The international combination of different backgrounds and the click you, of course, should have when working together brought us to a proud end result.
Introduction

The project is being worked out within a graduation studio Public Realm- Rotterdam. Studio Public Realm- Rotterdam focuses on themes such as relation between public and private, hybridity, densification and greenification of the city. The literature study is directed at notions of modernity, identity, public realm, public domain, junk space, place and ‘non place’.

Problem statement

Our project is an attack against modest, restrained urban design. After the final extremeness of modernity, today’s urbanism have developed an almost universal consensus, based on parcellation and typomorphological continuity of the existing. Each site is typically subdivided into smaller plots and clusters of individual operations by respecting an urban grid and resurrecting the procedures on which the traditional city is based. We all undeniably believe this approach is „right”. Our common fear for the big and the monolithic has driven us to idealize the human scale and the composite.

Let’s say out loud: the majority of the urban formation we now construct, and people-friendly language we use, is irredeemably awful, neither intriguing nor surprising. More and more, architects are positioned into demonstrations of peaceful, ego-less coexistence which results into artificial and life-less plans. What we, as architects and urban designers, have lost is our ability to see large, our courage to proclaim large ambitions, our pleasure in being visionaries and our chance to simulate the scenarios of „what if”.

We have to state that the seeming failure of today’s urban design and the case of Rotterdam, in particular, offers us an exceptional opportunity to take insane risk, to be bold and ambitious. The city is reinventing itself while being a unique innovative experiment in the context of Europe. It is Fragmented. Collaged. Hybrid. Contradicting. It has no history. No structure. The given specific site is not clearly expressed and perceived by public. Morphologically and infrastructurally it takes part in the need of connection on the north-south axe. Nevertheless, functionally and atmospherically it tends to create its own small environments. A question that rises is if scattered reality correlate with the role of the city?

Reflection

In this reflection paper you will have a chance to read passages from our texts about the project on the left column of each page. On the right column (the one you are reading now), we will try to reflect about the process and make some conclusions.

While working in a team, all our design decisions were made after long discussions and sketching together. Nevertheless, we felt that writing was also a way to create a sort of a theory for ourselves, to frame what we want to achieve for every design issue and then, only then, make the most objective step to solve problems.
Research methodology

This first subjective visual perception of the built environment in Rotterdam invited us to start the research through the phenomenological approach of Kevin Lynch. In his approach, Lynch estimates how individuals take in information of the city, how they perceive it and how they move through it. In the process of way-finding, the strategic link is the environmental image, the generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by an individual. This image is the product both of immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience, and it is used to interpret information and to guide action. In order to visualize the form of the city, Kevin Lynch uses five elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks.

While trying to frame our research within the phenomenological approach, we soon understood that it is too subjective and not enough in order to fully understand how the city center of Rotterdam works.

We state that architects should combine two methods of analysis – subjective vs objective. We chose data collection as the most objective method of analysis to juxtapose it with the phenomenological approach.

By understanding the visual image of the cities morphology, the way people use the city, and combine these relations with data analysis, we can question the validity of the first perception of hybridity and avoid being too blunt or too much one-sided in making design decisions. Moreover, the research method is becoming hybrid too. There is always a jump between objective and subjective. Both epistemes are not complete without each other and only together they help to create the groundwork for the project.

Making a framework to guide the analysis we created three categories.

The first part of the analysis has to do with the city as a static entity. We analysed six topics within the city form and compared with objective programmatic analysis.

The second part investigates the movements in the city: activities on the site and in the district, different types of traffic and urban flows.

The third part takes a look into the demographical data of Rotterdam and compare it with how these different users and inhabitants use the city.

The results of these three studies were also compared with each other and combined to come to the general conclusion on how the city center of Rotterdam works.

After concluding our findings on the analysis on district scale, we tried to apply the same methods on a smaller scale, the site within the strip and eventually on the level of the project site itself.

Reflection

We juxtaposed objective and subjective analysis in each of the three topics described. What benefits this combination brought to us? We had six different parts of analysis in the end and each of it could be overlapped with the other in order to get a maximum amount of various information and draw conclusions.

After analysis we started seeing the previously described identity as a core quality of Rotterdam. We started searching for new tools and concepts that are found by anticipating and utilizing the appearance of the city. How could we react to our conclusions? We managed to select an amount of important parameters related with a research that helped to start developing a project.

Was it a successful research methodology? On one hand, it was a successful bridging of the gap between analysis and design. It led to systematically described conclusions and clear future design parameters. Parameters were defined in terms of programme, routing, accessibility, building mass, sight lines, green and blue qualities, building heights and the interaction between public, private and semi-collective life. These are the topics that we analysed within a research. This method also helps to increase the capacity of both - phenomenological and data collection - epistemes compared with their application separately. One of the descriptions of hybridity is when two parts act together. You could say, it is a combination with benefits. In this way, our method of research also became hybrid.

On the other hand, it was difficult to collect this huge amount of information on relatively different topics within a given time. Our conclusions could have been stronger if we researched more extensively on each topic. It was also difficult and we were spending too much time trying to find the appropriate research methods as they were not determined by the studio and stayed explorative.

To conclude, it was a very useful and strongly theoretically based research.
Specific design topics for Msc4 architecture:
- study of shell: material / grid / size
- distinction between east and west according to atmospheres
- further development of the main public route
- the relation "inside" between the public functions and the private dwellings
- understanding the importance of urban agriculture
  - aqua park & spa, related to the restaurant / cafe and to the urban stage
  - urban stage, related to the school of healthy lifestyle, to sports, to the dwellings on top and to the surroundings

Building technology:
- improving structure, more integrated
  (how to bear the floating transparent boxes)
- possibility to implement the shell in structure
- possibility to develop a more smart roof / facade (sustainability)

Masterplan concept

In order to reveal our intentions, the true core parameters of the masterplan design, we expressed them again in a very hand made way - using the suprematist style collage as a prime graphic vehicle. We decided to no longer represent fake harmonies or formal compositions, but rather a new rule, or order, superimposed on the existing abstracted fragments. Our goal and nature of the project is to encourage conflict over synthesis, fragmentation over unity, madness and play over careful management while establishing a metaphysical link with the immediate surroundings.

The proposal aims to reconfigure the image of the city centre by inserting the pure hardcore longitudinal element as a metaphorical return of railway tracks in a completely new substance. The linear project: a single piece of architecture that spatially reorganizes its surroundings. It breaks but reassembles. It is blunt, straightforward, explicit, up front: It represents what it presents. No decoration. No crime. No ornament.

This long vector of infrastructure itself tries to rethink the typology of a Stoa. By adapting it to a more contemporary, dynamic experience, it evolves into a supersized inhabitable urban pergola.

The main concept is to generate a boulevard continuing from the city as a folded street and running through this envelope embodied in ramps, slopes, artificial landscape, escalators and travelators. The street theme influences the interpretation of city urban elements inside the building by creating interior plazas, stages, parks, monumental staircases, cafes, shops and other activities. Eventually, master plan turned out to be a transit strategy.

Reflection

A non-objective style with its simplification of form allowed us to interpret the city as an empty space and to smoothly translate parameters into a design. It gave possibilities to be specific at some points, to articulate the main idea, and still have freedom in interpreting the painting as an abstract subjective drawing. Although it may seem only as a piece of art, later almost literary translated into architectural form, for us it was a coherent step from analysis to urban design. Every line in a painting had a meaning - some metaphorical, some formal, some ideological or functional.

Now we can state that this drawing was one of the crucial points in a one year process. We learn that these kind of schemes/sketches/explanations of ideas can fix floating ideas and become a base for future development of a project. We could always look back and check if we are not losing the initial idea.

We tried to hold on as long as possible to the abstract shape of the connecting red element. This is the most important aspect of the masterplan and should be visible till the end of the design - from masterplan to architecture, to human scale, to the scale of detailing.

Then we questioned ourselves if and how such a mega-intervention could be articulated as a single homogenous block. Or should it still be constructed of a series of independent, juxtaposed areas that could be adjusted according to the needs of site, program, time or context?

That was very interesting case to make a jump from the top-down approach to an architectural scale. How to articulate programmatic and spatial needs and how to manipulate in between appearing new constraints? Sometimes we had to break rules but never at the expense of the main urban concept. Every new step we were making, we managed to base it on the previous one.
Events

This structure is able to inhabit all different kind of typologies, densities and programs. Hereby we are presenting our own proposal dealing with today's realities.

We see Hofbogen project as a future green line of Rotterdam and our project as a critical endpoint of it merging into the city and giving back the importance to a market square as a historical core of the city. Our project happens to appear in between these two important parts of Rotterdam city.

So, we aim to create a new alternative programmatic cluster with its own identity. We initiate new programmes ranging from spa, Aqua Park, multifunctional stage and sports to spreading eco-friendly practices such as urban agriculture, organic food shops and eco-educational activities. All within the theme of urban healthy lifestyle. This programme does not compete with a city but add a new quality or rather a destination point. It becomes a new fragment not only typo-morphologically and ideologically, but also programmatically.

Our proposal resists the definition of a unified building, instead existing as a spatial network of different identities that grow around the public route. Its strewed organization promotes complexity, creating the collision of unexpected programs and visitors. Therefore, we intend to develop strategies to organize both - independence and interdependence of programmes within a larger entity - in a symbiosis that increases unity but does not compromise specificity. The parts remain committed to the specific spatial characters, to the whole and to each other.

Reflection

One of the main aims of Rotterdam and themes of our studio is greenification and densification of a city. These two words were always going together in our design as complementary to each other. In this design stage, we started having a feeling that our project can become a part of the main future green artery in a city and help attract people to the historically most important district. Soon we understood that we will have to deal with various programs and many different requirements. We had to find a way how to respond while not forgetting the notions of greenification and densification.

We claimed that within this contradicting relationship between urbanism and architecture, we can sustain an experimental syllabus of events in a single container: by collecting all the contradictory demands of complex programmatic volumes without attempting to resolve them as unity and casting them in a totally arbitrary, pleasing form, we generated charm on a smaller scale from heterogeneous elements. The longitudinal element must be homogeneous on a larger scale, compared to being heterogeneous on a smaller scale. New events and meanings can be created when programming diversity within a single static envelope. Thus, we applied the model known as an effective medium approach, or effective medium approximations. We also wanted to profoundly explore the requirements and exploit the typology of those heterogenous elements. And we were allowed to do that without losing a unifying image of the intervention.

Reflection

We saw context as a constraint at the beginning but the more we tried to understand it, the more it started enriching our design. We clarified our priorities and made compromises. In the end relation between the existing and the new became an important argument that helped to make the right choices, for instance, in choosing materials or defining the most appropriate program. We understood that our building not only creates a dialogue with surroundings, but also activates relations between existing!

Relation to context

The physical relation between the existing site and the building is raised to a more intense level. We anchor to the place by designing a particular condition through which a building is rooted. Rather than a passive contextual approach, our intervention is a continuous grid of porous thresholds that filters exchanges with the varying identities of urban fabric. It should challenge the existing situation, as well as respecting it.

How do we create this relationship? We introduce four contextual atmospheres in the area, each having a unique identity. We use appendages (the dropped out volumes from urban pergola) as in between elements' binding longitudinal intervention with the context. They need different visual characteristics and inhabit special program related with atmospheres.

Appendages are designed of concrete and represent a non-competitive relationship between intervention and surroundings. Neutrality of the material creates dialogue with both oppositions – the new urban pergola and the existing city.
When we jump from urbanism to the level of architecture we are interested again in how this 500 meters urban pergola is constructed. If we explode it and assemble again, we can demonstrate what the role of each component is.

Firstly, they all act on a different flexibility level. We find out the similarities with Bernard Tschumi’s ideas about vector and envelope, about space, event and movement.

Space is defined by a static and rigid outer envelope – structural frames. While envelope defines space for playful intervention, semi-flexible movement vectors embodied in ramps and platforms activate on urban level. Deforming the floor not in plan but in section potentially turns the seemingly inevitable separation of different floors into a continuous experience, while ending at the same time the regimes of spatial orthogonality that have dominated architecture.

After already having a clear understanding of the public route, we can articulate the space in a most decent and playful way. Platforms are vertically meandering through the interior volumes – the most flexible and demountable envelopes.

Greenery, free component, is an essential part of a city as a counterbalance to hard and solid buildings. It invades envelopes at certain points where open-air social encounters can take place.

With advise of Nicola we understood how to read our project and the project-elements in relation to time, flexibility and expression. This kind of definition, explained in our parti drawing, was another crucial step in understanding our design and becoming more confident with what we are doing.

In relation to time, portals are everlasting, platforms running through already a bit less, volumes can be changed according to the need in time, etc. Greenery changes every minute by the wind, the shadow they cast, they are different every month, every year.

This proportion between greenery and intervention, between open and closed fascinated us from the beginning and finally everything came together with a clear position within a design.

We also started discussing materialisation and questioned then ourselves: could a project articulate an architectural manifest about the nature of viewing? Could the building’s envelope be transparent and public instead of opaque and private, reversing conventional expectations? We say yes. Architecture is becoming even more provocative when envelopes are blurred and different concepts are juxtaposed or superimposed. Envelopes help to define activity while movement vectors can express and mediate with the outside world.

We became aware that it is impossible to solve the materialization issue of this super-complex intervention through a single unifying gesture. That is also why we want to create different identities through the building; we already did this by having a number of typologies. Now we can employ materials to enhance the concept of changing environment. In the long volume we apply different types of metals for each building typology to showcase the identity.
Screenplay as an investigation tool of a relationship between events

Architecture is not defined by how it looks, or even how it works, but by how it is used. The full reading of a building requires moving through it. In other words, the relationship of the body to space and the way the building is organized as you walk inside it are just as important as the physical appearance of the walls around it.

We are aiming for unique, unexpected and unexplored conditions in a city. The spaces range from common urban typologies to exaggerated architectural demonstrations. The events include both everyday occurrences and extreme passions. The depictions of events that originate in movie sequences are taken as paralleling the architectural formalization of spaces. Architecture does not exist without the movement of the bodies that populate it. Especially when architecture is cross-related with infrastructural urbanism.

Reflection

We were (and still are) discovering the technique of showing the project as a movie screenplay.

It started as a tool for ourselves to get a better grip on the possibilities of the design and its also a good way to present to the audience. It gives structure in understanding the possibilities the design contains. Moreover, the intervention is an inhabit ed infrastructural element of the city, so moving through it and creating a sequence of scenes seemed like a very appropriate method.

We identify the system of zones and present them in a sequence of scenes that we would like to address. Each zone will host a specific spatial identity with necessary environmental conditions. The zones are standalones, but positioned in such a way that interaction can easily be orchestrated.

Quality of scenes is expressed in:
- relation to direct surrounding
- shape of build volume (in 3D!)
- shape of non-build volume (in 3D!)
- routing
- atmosphere
- materialisation in color and texture
- (mix of) users
- intended use and the possibility for unintentionally use

We can see now our design as a possible example of how to design in a complex, dense location, while still improving quality of the existing.