Reflection graduation

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Reflection

With this research I wished to explore the experience of architecture, to finish my studies at TU Delft with a research that embodies what I find most important in architecture. I am fascinated with the power of architecture to create meaning and to touch people in the core of their being. For me, sacred architecture embodies this power. Sacredness or holiness is an experience that lies beyond symbolism, functionality, aesthetics and beyond the identity of a religion. It creates an experience that moves you, and creates a feeling of calmness, togetherness and wholeness, with nature, humanity or the cosmos. The feeling is overwhelming, one of a beautiful world and the infinity of the cosmos, putting life into perspective. Sacred spaces can facilitate contemplation, have a certain serenity and offer an escape from the hectic world, the busy life, the profane.

During my education I have often found that architecture is seen as something that stands on its own. It is an icon, a symbol, a political statement or an endorsement of the name of the architect. Too often it has little to do with how people will actually live in it, work in it, experience it. Whereas that is in fact exactly what matters to me in architecture, an atmosphere of well-being and beauty, inspiration and growth, being a part of society. Within my masters I have been looking for the balance between functionality, technique, the experience and the atmosphere. To further develop myself in this direction I have chosen to participate in Explorelab 18. Within this studio I was able to focus on my own fascination and use that as a starting point for a research and a design project. My fascination is the ability of architecture to move people, specifically the ability of sacred architecture to encourage a certain state of mind, contemplation, introspection and social cohesion.

Relation of the research with the contemporary society

It is important that the research has value within the developments of the current society. The current society is one that is derived from the individualization, which created an era of the liberated, free thinkers and secularism. In the 60s people wanted freedom, they wanted to experience everything everywhere. They wanted to create their own set of rules and values, they wanted no longer to be identified with a specific religion, nor to follow one indiscriminately. This increased the drop in church attendance and the influence of religious institutions declined, to a point where we now speak of a secular society in Western-Europe (Botton, 2014; Stegers, 2008).

The decline of the religious institutes does not imply that the need for spiritually has disappeared. There is a majority that is found between the believers and the absolute rationalists, a group that sometimes want to believe something and “are enthusiasts for transcendent meaning” (Gopnik, 2014, p. 4). This group tries to find their own set of beliefs, a personal religious identity and moral framework, and does not feel at home in a church, mosque, synagogue or temple. This individualistic approach is also seen in the Netherlands where according to Prins (2008a) around 65% of the Dutch youth still prays, yet, not towards God but towards “something higher”. They search and self-
experiment to create their own mixture of different movements, to create a framework of meaning and a sense of purpose.

Sacred spaces can facilitate contemplation, serenity, an escape from the hectic world, the busy life, the profane. I think in our current – secular - society there is a basis for a new typology, one functions as a social and spiritual heart of the city - rather than a specific religion. A place that has the atmosphere of a sacred experience, that encourages introspection and contemplation, and functions as a metaphysical house for society.

Research

During my research I wanted to investigate what was this sacred atmosphere, how is it induced by architecture and how does sacred architecture facilitate the “contemplative experience” of its visitors? For this, the research was focus on the atmosphere, with the object to discover the poetic qualities that create such a space. The goal was to create a set of guidelines for the design of such an atmosphere.

Research methods

The research is split mainly in two parts, the first a literary framework, and the second an analyses of several case studies. Throughout the research, three methods have been used. The first being a literature study, used for both parts. The second is a visual study of models and photographs and the third a phenomenological research consisting of a description of personal experiences of some of the case studies, and interviews.

The literature study focussed in the first part on both the meaning of the word sacred, and the theories that where important to comprehend this. In the second part it was used to analyse case studies. The first part of the literature study aimed to create a theoretical framework as a well-founded basis for further visual research. This literature study took up more time that I first expected, but also gave more insight than I had predicted. I primarily wanted to base the research on experiences and atmosphere, however found during the design process that the actual meaning of the word sacred and the several descriptions of it, where a great inspiration and support during the design process. They played a larger role than first expected in the design process.

The second part of the research describes the experience of sacredness in architecture and art as a phenomenon. This is explained through both the idea behind the works and through the architectural or artistic means to create the atmosphere. During the research it became clear that in particular the experience was of great importance, more so than the idea behind the works of art. This resulted in a shift from a purely theoretical analysis, to a descriptive analysis of the experience. This then resulted in a shift in analysed project, from ones that are interesting in theory, to ones that I could personally visit and experience. Thus projects such as Who's afraid of red, yellow and blue of Barnet Newman, the Black square of Malevich and Villa Malaparte were taken from the research. Other projects such as the monastery of St. Benedictusberg were deliberately added. Of several projects a personal description of the experience is added, to be able to convey the atmosphere of the space. For this not only words but
also drawings and photographs are used. I had chosen to look at both architecture and art, which both gave very valuable information. Where the analyses of a building generates easier architectural guidelines, it was the analyses of the works of art that inspired me the most. The works of art made me be able to look in a different way in understanding atmosphere and experiences. They inspired me and generated a lot of imagery on how to create atmosphere, in a more poetic way.

Parallel to the literature research and case studies, a visual study of models and photographs was conducted. This study had the aim widening the perspective and of developing a physical link between theory and imagery. In the first research proposal, these models where set to represent the atmosphere, and be tested during the phenomenological interviews. The goal was to interview several candidates and ask them about different atmospheres, to see which architectural means work. However, during the model study it became evident that models were, for me, not a useful tool to express the atmosphere. A multi-sensory bodily experience of a space is so complex that it cannot be tested through a model. Firstly because there are so many small details that play a role in the full experience, that it is impossible to recreate them in a test model. Secondly, and most importantly, because a full experience is a bodily experience that incorporates all the senses. A test model on scale is a representation of mainly the sight, the visual aspect of a space. Through a scaled representation one cannot feel the size of the space, the smell, the sound, the temperature etc. Therefore, it was decided not to use the models as test-cases for interviews anymore. As a result, also the planned phenomenological interviews did no longer take place. Only three candidates where interviewed as a pilot study, based on the research methodology of the book of John Cresswell (1998) Qualitative inquiry and research design, choosing among five approaches. Instead of further interviews, I added a personal description of the experience of actual spaces.

The models do still play a part in the research, but no longer as a test-case for several atmospheres. They do still create an atmosphere, but mainly represent a specific objective that came from the literature research on the meaning of the sacred. The models and photographs where made both intuitively and in relation to the results from the literature research. The study is based on Borgdorff (2009). He describes that artistic research is focused on enlarging the artistic universe. The essence was to creating new imagery, words, narratives or experiences. Therefore the models are enriched by text, describing the experience of them as if they would be buildings. In that way I tried to create a representation of a full experience.

Even though, the way the research methods where used changed during my studies, I believe I accomplished to use them the best way possible. The first research proposal was made when I was still new at the topic studied. During the research I found out more specifically what actually mattered and therefore adjusted the proposal several times, to able to accomplish the goal more precisely. I believe the combination of the literature study, the case study analyses including personal descriptions and the model study generates an overall description of the essence of the experience. The combination of different methods, gives a complete representation of the experience in both words and image.
Process
The process of the research was not as fluently as I had hoped. I had a hard time grasping what I was actually doing, trying to achieve, and what I should research to get there. For the set up of my research I was inspired by Juhani Pallasmaa’s description on what can be a sacred experience. He describes that the experience of sacredness as induced by architecture or the arts, is one different from the religious experience. A religious experience is created by an encounter with specific places, people, or objects that are depicted as sacred. The experience of sacredness induced by architecture or arts, in a secular society is as “a sensitized encounter of the Self and the World. This experience arises from the holiness of life itself and deep existential experience of being” (Pallasmaa, [2007]2012a, p. 108). Therefore I first intended to stay away from religious architecture and of symbolism. To research purely the atmosphere of experience one can have in certain spaces. However during the literary inquiry on the sacred and the profane, I found many denotations, philosophies and ideas that inspired me. I found that symbolizing the sacred, does not necessarily have to symbolize a religion, it can also mainly represent a place that is different (which was the most helpful description). The model study gives an idea on how this idea of the sacred could be translated into architecture.

During the research I tried to combine two things, on the one hand a study on the actual experience of the atmosphere, which is something you feel at once. On the other hand the idea of the sacred that can be symbolized, which is something that you cannot see at once but only notice later on. I tried to combine these two by creating theme’s, which however did not make the research more clearer. Therefore I decided to show the variety of experiences and atmosphere created, and how they can all create a sense of the sacred.

Up until my P2 presentation, I was mostly occupied by this research, and trying to assemble the information in a logical way. It was after this presentation, where I was told I had gathered to much information without drawing a conclusion, that I stopped and looked at what I had. The next part of the research was mainly trying to find what was really the essence of what I was trying to say, and how to make this come across. Realizing that the models should not represent the atmosphere and be used in interviews, was of great help in that process. By using the models in a different way, they become more valuable and still combine theory with imagery.

What I found most difficult in the process was the constant feeling that I turned around the essence, but could not grasp it. This might also be the research paradox, trying to describe an experience that is ineffable. An experience of silence, the space between the notes, of that which is not describable. Early on in the research I made an hypotheses of several architectural means used to create the atmosphere. Although these where often found in case studies, I cannot say that they together should form a set of guidelines. I don’t think a fixed set of rules or guidelines should be the outcome. Even though in conclusion I mentioned some architectural means, or objectives often used in sacred atmospheres, I do believe that it is the intuition of the designer that in the end creates a good design or not. Design in general, and specifically the design of an atmosphere, cannot be based on ratio. The research topic is one that in general cannot be based on ratio.
Design

The project goal was to recreate this experience of sacredness, the atmosphere, within a space for society, for everyone who wants a place in the city to visit, to gather, to contemplate and find serenity. A place that represents the heart of society, for people who happen not to believe in anything, people who don't know what they believe or just anyone who wants to feel the warmth of a social place or have a place for contemplation.

Relation design and research

Throughout the research I constantly moved between the theory and the idea, and the experience of a space, the atmosphere. In the design I tried to combine them, by using a set idea as a underlay of the design, and then focus on the experience of a space. It was the constant separation and combination of the two that took me a long time in the process. I felt there was a thin line between a concept that was too dogmatic, and a atmospheric space that was too soft. The design should not be a toolbox of what is all possible with architecture, but should also not be too strongly based on the idea, since it is the atmosphere that creates the sacred and not only the symbol. Especially since I believe that the design should also reinterpret what the meaning of sacred is in the current society. In history, religions also try to show there is only one answer, one reality. This is a feeling I wanted to avoid in the design. I believe that today, the sacred should not represent one way or one answer, but the search of people. On the other hand, I do believe that the essence of the experience is one that exceed differences in believe, background history etc. and is therefore the same. Which creates a duality between being different, and having a different search, and that in the essence we are all the same. Therefore in the design I have searched for a long time what is the right balance between an orderly world, and one where people can wander. I have tried to accomplish this by making a very clear and orderly underlay, which is still subtle and open by means of the garden, material, paths and exceptions.

Secondly, what was a challenge in the design process was that it was based on an atmosphere. Where normally at the TU delft you have a program and site analyses that form the basis of a design, I started with the desire to create an atmosphere. But how do you design an atmosphere, or a feeling? I believe this is also why this design task was so valuable, because I learned how to focus the atmosphere, and combine this with the reality of a site and space. Creating an atmosphere is about designing so that it can actually be build, deciding on the materials, transitions, lightening and every small detail. Therefore I was constantly forced between reality and the slightly utopia idea of the design.

For me the research and design are inherent to one another. The research will therefore also not be truly finished until the design is. Until the experience of atmosphere I designed is actually there, and I would be able to ask what people think. Even though it is not possible to conduct phenomenological research on a model, I do think it is valuable to test weather I have achieved my goal, by asking others to try and imagine the place for real. Only with that, the research will be completed.