RESEARCH AND REFLECTION

Jayadeep Premnath
Student Number – 4181174
TUTOR – Tanner Merkeley
TALL Graduation Studio
Materialisation Chair MSc 03/04
Introduction

The Skyscraper or High-rise tower is a typology which has occupied a considerable share of the debate and attention of much of the architectural discourse in the last few decades. Its size and height denies it to have a subdued presence in any urbanscape. Cities pride in their skyline of skyscrapers as a symbol of modernity and financial strength. An original American ‘invention’; skyscrapers or high-rises were devised to serve growing commercial space requirements of its cities. And their unmatched ability to densify neighbourhoods has made the High-rise assume new roles in a fast urbanising world; a condition foreseen by Louis Sullivan who called them apparatuses for reinventing city life and a constructivist social condenser: a machine to generate and intensify forms of human intercourse ¹.

But the uncontrolled dissemination and increasing domination of skyscrapers over the urban landscapes has imposed considerable strain to the traditional fabric of many cities. Often criticized for their singular existence and lack of sensitivity to their surroundings and context, they have often led to increasing ghettos of lifeless districts within cities. The streets and plazas around them are often devoid of activities or life; pointing to the lack of attention paid to establish a relationship with the streets and public life around.

This essay concerns the some of the pressing questions which faced me from the onset and reflect on the research and methodologies adopted to address these issues. Can the design of a High-rise tower re-establish the lost relationship between the street and the building? Can it assume a form which responds and respects the scale of its neighbourhood? How can the architectural language of such a massive structure relate to the issues of identity and image for its occupants and city?

Project brief

The design brief of TALL studio calls for High-rise tower for the European Union on the Wetstraat in Brussels as part of an overall masterplan proposed for the area by Christian Potzamparc. The tower will house most of the European Union offices spread across the city and will be the tallest of many EU buildings which will ultimately line the avenue. The program of 220,000 m² of floor space includes offices, residential, retail and conference facilities and form a complete district of mixed functions, to be embedded into the urban pattern in the European quarter of the city. Beyond the functional and technical challenges, the design will focus on the impacts on the city and surroundings.²

Image and identity

“Nowadays buildings are characterised by their neutrality, the indeterminacy of an architecture stripped of all traces of uniqueness and specificity”

Rem Koolhaas (1998)

Rem Koolhaas, whose studies on the skyscrapers in ‘Delirious New York’ talks about the recurring theme of indeterminacy; a lack of relation between the geometric form of the building and its functions; which is a consequence of the constantly changing functions in a market economy. Through his later works he explores this theme and questions the informal independence of the

¹ Cortes, Juan Antonio(1998); Delirious and More, OMA/REM KOOLHAS; El Croquis: Madrid
² TALL VCE,reader(2012)
architecture from the semantics. Many of the modern-day High-rise towers faces this conflict; the inability to use the vocabulary of image and identity in a meaningful dialogue with the city.

The proposed tower for EU will be the tallest in the city; and with its multiple programmatic requirements will surely have a certain critical mass to attain a monumental status. This opens up issues of identity and image the building will bring to the institution occupying it. In a fast changing political and economic landscape, it is increasingly important for democratic and stabilising institutions to assert an image of stability and permanence to the society.

A semiological study focusing on the EU will help to formalise an appropriate language which can effectively reflect the organisation. The European Union or the EU is an organisation of 27 democratic states of Europe which originally began as a trading bloc but grew over the years overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers to become an organisation with significant influence across the world. Robert Cooper in ‘The Breaking of Nations’ describes the EU as a ‘Post Modern state’, an entity which exists in a virtual realm dispelling icons and images; and choosing to exist in networks, agreements and laws. This is also an organisation which is in a constant flux whose relevance is both questioned and restated.

It was imperative that the language of the existing EU buildings be understood to move forward. But the Morphological studies of existing EU buildings showed an organisation which is in a constant struggle to define its form and identify its ideological and cultural boundaries. The existing buildings of EU spread across Europe constantly fail to make a statement, preferring to stay behind generic forms and typologies. My design exercise will strive to correct this and the new EU Tower should have a form whose architectural language reflects its values and character.

Context and public space
The streets and squares fronting churches formed the original public space in European cities and this was a feature shared by cities as diverse as Copenhagen and Barcelona. A European city is best experienced on foot and it was also in the streets where much of city’s public events used to happen.

Praxeological studies highlight how buildings with little engagement with its context have destroyed the original qualities of traditional European cities. In the existing urban scenario, most of the central business districts of major cities are no longer a place of public activities and events. Traditional shop-houses and cafes are replaced by new office buildings which in their singular existence are least welcoming to a pedestrian and to the neighbourhood. These buildings often have closed ground levels; leaving nothing for the passerby to look at or engage with; and leave behind streets and neighbourhoods devoid of life or activities.

A typo-morphological study of the context to understand its position was done by visiting the site and its neighbourhood; which revealed that Wetstraat faces the same problem of insensitive urban interventions in traditional neighbourhoods. The Wetstraat and neighbouring areas were originally one of the many low-rise neighbourhoods of Brussels built on Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s block structure. When Brussels was designated as the seat of EU, Wetstraat became the location for many of the EU offices and the main avenue and its surroundings underwent considerable change with the construction of new buildings in the 1980’s and 90’s. These buildings

---

3 Cortes, Juan Antonio(1998); Delirious and More, OMA/REM KOOLHAS; El Croquis: Madrid
4 Jencks, Charles.(1986); What is Post-Modernism?, St Martin’s Press: New York
were planned with no contribution of activities to the city and had long stretches of blank walls facing the street.

The design for the proposed tower should address the crisis facing today’s city streets and come up with a viable solution which can re-establish the lost relationship between the street and the building. The podium of the tower should also have a public plaza, and activities and programs which can make it a catalyst for injecting new life into Wetstraat and create a stage for public life and activities; which is the spirit of a European city.

A high-rise tower in a low-rise context needs to react to its context sensitively, and respect the scale of the existing urban fabric. This is essential to retain the integrity of the neighbourhood and maintain a sense of continuity. To achieve this, the podium and massing of the tower needs to respond to the scale of buildings which surrounds the site. This formed one of the generative ideas during the design development stage.

The spatial organisation of the neighbourhood and surroundings were studied using diagrams of circulations and sections as tools. The inputs from these studies formed the basis of the design development of the podium of the tower. Phenomenology and morphology was used for massing scheme study for the podium. The massing studies used small foam blocks, sizes of which related to the neighbouring buildings of the site. These smaller blocks coming together created fissures, projections and terraces which could react to the roads and buildings around. This language of staggering and connected blocks was then carried up to the tower design creating a homogenous whole, also relating to the idea of an organisation made up of equally important individual members.

Reflection

The relation between research and design

Studying the EU helped me understand the spirit of the organisation and its functioning. I found an organisation which is made up of numerous member states and organisations and which is in a state of constant flux, constantly growing, yet remaining true to its original spirit. This led to the initial ideas of creating the massing using small cubes, which were representing the individual members. The resulting fragmented massing gives the building an incomplete feel; representing a construction constantly at work. Here the idea of an interconnected, fragmented form wouldn’t have been developed had it not been the research into the workings of EU including the essays by Charles Jencks.

The method of case studies to arrive at a conclusion was immensely helpful when designing the technical core and also the public space of the building. By studying the shortcomings and advantages of completed projects, an efficient design could be arrived at.

The relation between the theme of the studio and the subject/case study chosen within this framework (location/object)

The theme of the studio asked for an alternate model for the tower and its public space. While studying completed buildings and public spaces, it was difficult to find projects which the two converged which all the more pointed to the challenge involved. But efforts were made to relate the chosen projects to the idea of dynamic massing and interactive public space.
The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the studio and the method chosen by the student within this framework

The core of the Materialisation chairs design approach is rigorous research and constant improvement. This method influenced the whole design process starting from massing studies using physical models and core design. In addition, weekly updates and graduation book proposed by the tutors helped in creating a framework which guided the rest of the process by constantly reminding me of the main points to be covered.

The relation between the project and the wider social context

From many case studies, one thing apparent was how uneasy these high-rises meet the ground; often having a very negative and inactive space around. Creating a very active public plaza and podium can be a very challenging task and how I tackled this will be the defining point of my design. Most of the central business districts of major cities are no longer welcoming to a pedestrian; with buildings shutting down their ground level to the passersby; leaving nothing for them to look at or engage with. The office building typology which includes high-rise towers filling up the cities for the last few decades have destroyed much of the original spirit of the European cities and leaves behind streets and neighbourhoods devoid of life or activities. So it is essential that a solution be found which can be welcoming to the public and create more life into the streets.