THE SPIDER IN THE WEB

reflection paper
Reflection on graduation product, process and planning

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I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDIO

“A building is not something you finish. A building is something you start.”
-Steward Brand, 1994

If a building has a certain amount of functional, aesthetical, cultural or contextual value, it should be considered a piece of art. However, by the time it gets put into use, the building is not yet finished, unlike a painting for example. Actually, according to Brand, a building is never finished. Because it has a certain user and a stated purpose in society, the building’s lifecycle will only just start at the moment it is taken into use. Hereafter, if the context changes, the building will also change along in order to adapt. Therefore institutional buildings are continuously subject to change and keep on 'learning', even after the last brick is placed (Brand, 1995). According to Pallasmaa (2012), the building’s purpose in society causes its identity to be attached to a continuum of evolving culture and life, and therefore, of time; its past echoes through present day and future.

Since society is always changing, so are the buildings in it. It is therefore important that one is aware of this fact, so that change and development can be managed. Whenever another piece of art, like a painting, suffers from damage, it is very common to repair it and restore it in its original state. In this case the painting will not lose its values, since it was merely a snapshot of its time. Now when a building is for example no longer fit to its purpose, it can’t go back to an earlier state of being. The building has to adapt and evolve with its ever-changing context (Meurs, 2004).

The introduction above shows that buildings are not singular objects, but part of a larger whole. The material of the buildings breathes the underlying story and somehow shows layer for layer the evolution of culture and life. When these layers are thoroughly analyzed, they provide us an extensive knowledge, which is the source we need in order to create the new.

In my opinion it is impossible to create something out of nothing. The historical context; the genius loci and its value in our life and culture are, and always should be, the foundation of the design project.

The subject of my graduation project, the Binnengasthuisterrein in Amsterdam, is located in the oldest part of the city. The ensemble of buildings, varying from being built in the early 17th century to the late 20th century, is nowadays in use for the University of Amsterdam. The different functions the buildings used to have; cloisters, hospitals, still reflect through today's presence. The goal for my graduation project was to design something new, dealing with this rich history. Not out of nostalgia, but to create a new layer on the existing in order to prolong the building’s existence and emphasize its depth.

Reuse of buildings is also very relevant from two different points of view. On the one hand there is a large inventory of vacant buildings in our country. Creating new buildings is unnecessary if we find a way to continuously adapt our current building stock to our present-day needs. It is about time we realize our resources are limited, and looking for already existing options is a far more sustainable and durable way to treat the built environment, than unthinkingly building the new.
On the other hand, this is a way to *maintain* our heritage. By adding new layers to the existing buildings, we get far more interesting objects. Not only is this convenient for the building itself, also the tangible can represent the intangible stories of history, so that our collective memory will be preserved and perpetuated. The collective memory is in the end what defines our culture, which puts the studio, but also my project specifically in a wider social context.

II. METHODOICAL LINE OF APPROACH

The triangle below shows there is a relation between the aspects *design, cultural heritage* and *technology*. This triangle shows that cultural value and technology are the foundation for design and is specific for the approach of the Heritage & Architecture studio.

![Diagram](Illustration 1: The fundamental triangle of the Heritage & Architecture studio; interrelation between design, technology and cultural value. (own image, based on H&A Studio Manual))

I agree with the fact that there is an existing interplay between the three aspects, with the top focus on design. However, this triangle is too schematic when I reflect it upon my own graduation process. Not only cultural value and technology form the base of the pyramid that should lead to the design, but also aspects such as thematic research and program were of a big influence, and on its turn, were composed by, and influenced by each other directly. If you would state this into a diagram, assuming there is no hierarchy between the other aspects than design, it would look like this:
In a graduation project like this, as a concluding assignment for the master track Architecture, this scheme will more or less suffice, since the stake is aimed on the design; the final product. However, in my opinion, in practice the design shouldn’t be the final goal. If this would be the case, we would live in a world where architects would build in order to be recognized by their peers. Instead, the final goal should be the architecture in its full context of culture and life; keeping in mind there is an often laic end user, in order to avoid the situation on the illustration below, where not much of the initial quality is remained.

Illustration 2: Adapted Heritage & Architecture triangle, supplemented with the aspects program and thematic research. (own image)
Therefore, I think the final diagram should display the design, or in this case the more comprehensive ‘architecture’ in the middle, since it is not a final product, but a continuously evolving central entity as earlier stated by both Meurs, Pallasmaa and Brand.

Illustration 3: The difference between the final design of the architect and the functional interpretation of a laic end user illustration by Louis Hellman (www.architectsjournal.co.uk)

Illustration 4: Centering of the more comprehensive aspect *architecture* in the middle of the scheme, stating the architect *spider in the web*. (own image)
III. INTERRELATION: THE SPIDER IN THE WEB

The final diagram in the previous paragraph shows the position where a graduate student needs to place himself in the process in order to get to an integral and complete final design; as a spider in its web. Where in the past I would sometimes work in a sequence of steps, (first determine the project, then analyze and research, then start designing, and so on) this time I really tried to be aware of the fact that I am the overall manager of my own graduation project.

This diagram as mentioned before shows the ultimate form of research by design. By solving problems or creating ideas in one section, all others get influenced, leaving new issues to solve on another area. By narrowing down this process along the way the end product should continuously improve.

Illustration 5: desirable spiral of the design process. (own image)

As good as one can be aware of the ‘spider in the web’ fact, the lessons learned for future projects lie in the sketch of the spiral above. Contrary to what is stated before in this paper, this graduation project does have a clear ending with a design as a final product. Because the continuous interplay of research by designed wasn’t considered in the overall planning as it occurred in the actual process, there was a certain moment where the planning was let go and I got lost in the spiral of research by design. This has led to the fact that I got stuck in the spiral of solving issues in several areas, without narrowing down the total scope of the project. Ever since this is my graduation project, I tried to do too much and wanted to be too original at some points, causing my project to be focused on a wide scope, without going into depth.
With fixed moments such as P3 and P4 in prospect actual design decisions had to be made anyway and the amount of decisions had to be narrowed down. These moments helped me yet to get to a fulfilling final result. Eventually, the wide scope of my project is in harmony with the depth of my elaboration.

However I’m completely satisfied with my final product, I think for the future it is convenient to consider the existence of the spiral of illustration 5 from the beginning. In this way, it is easier to determine what the final product should be, and is it possible to regulate the diminution of the spiral myself. The process I encountered now, I may have ended up with other design results than initially intended due to ‘rushed’ resolutions.

IV. BIBLIOGRAPHY


