Reflection P4
Border Conditions Graduation Studio, May 2013

Public Baths in Brussels
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A. Relation between the Theme of the studio and my subjective

For my master graduation project I had the ambition to work on a project that tackles precise spatial problems and at the same time forms a response to poetic quests. The Border Condition studio was very much aligned with this point of view and therefore very suitable for the development of my architectural project.

Periphery of Brussels is the theme that the studio put on the table and was approached with bottom-up research methods. After investigating the city in situ, I found out Brussels represents itself through the condition of fragmentation and interrelation of the different fragments. The conclusion on which my project was based on was that in the case of Brussels, periphery is actually urban fragments that penetrate central urban areas and interrupt it creating contrasting spatial conditions. The zone along the canal is a periphery zone crossing the city. It maintains a distinctive atmosphere along its total length. Therefore My location is situated at the point where the canal zone meets the border of the historical centre and they become the periphery of each other. My proposal is to relate the periphery of the canal with the surrounding central urban fragments with an intervention that suggests the penetration of the periphery in the central condition and not the opposite that usually happens, underestimating the spatial conditions that periphery has. Another reason why I choose to relate my project with the canal is related to the program of the design. Brussels reject its relation to water especially after the covering of the river (1930). At the same time as a result of insufficient drainage system and intensive rain, areas in the centre of Brussels are occasionally confronted with uncontrolled floods. My proposal is to design Public Baths as floodplain, in other words to design a floodplain, an area that floods in case of water level rise and becomes a bathing space.

B. Relation between methodical line of the studio and method chosen by me - Relation between research and design

As was mentioned above Brussels has been researched with bottom-up methods. That was done with specific methods that were inspired by the Border Conditions studio. Before, while and after navigating in the city we were worked on interpretation of space by the designing maps through which the design emerges. Since the beginning each designer was encouraged to develop his very personal designing style and method that is of course specified by the exact spatial conditions he or she investigated.

In my project I investigated the relation between spatial fragments. I concluded that what first seems to be a random unclear spacial formation, it is actually a combination of different spatial orders and scales that result an explicite spatial experience, what I defined as 'fragmented promenade'. In fragmented promenade navigation appears as movement in a fragmented
choreography guided by subjective views, views far away and close by. Therefore I implied this phenomenon on maps so that the spacial effect that is researched is represented at the map of the research area but also constructs the map itself. Every map could be read as a whole but also as a story of individual fragments interconnected.

The same spacial effect is implied in the design of public baths. The constructed maps were redesigned in retrospect so that their properties and characteristics forms and spatial conditions are studied and re-interpreted. The elaboration on the maps was followed by a step-by-step spatial configuration that took into account the spacial effect of a fragmented promenade. That was done by designing space as an articulation of different spatial fragments where navigation is based on subjective views, drifting and discovering. Instead of having one clear hierarchy, spaces are connected in alternative ways giving choices and multiple ways of experiencing the same space or spatial element.

The building is a maze created by contrasting fragments with interchangeable hierarchy. The interchangeable hierarchy is also applied in the way smaller spaces are adjacent to wider ones. Relating bigger spaces with smaller ones on the one hand is dealing with the condition of one being the periphery of the other and on the other hand is dealing with interconnection of condensed and expanded spaces. What is more the issue of scale is being tackled as small scales are connected to bigger ones and vis versa, therefore a bigger space opens to a small one and vis versa. Fragmentation in one fragment also deals with the issue of scale as a 'zoom in' inside an architectural object.

In the end the architectural project is about a fragmented promenade in which one moves as if in a choreography through fragments, a promenade build up by repetitions and moments, collision of speeds, combination of far away and close by views, interchangeable hierarchies and combination of scales.

The fragments differ in terms of scale, light condition, materiality, temperature and humidity. In that sense, the program of baths successfully interweaves with the spatial conditions that were investigated. Water adds to the differentiation of spaces making the fragmentation stronger. What is more it appears in different scales as it can moisture a space as a cloud of very small drops, cross it as a small canal or to the other extreme totally flood a space. At the same time water creates visual effects, such as reflection, agreeing with visual effects appearing in fragmented spaces and enrich them. (Temporary) Presence of water also has its origin on the issue of scale as it varies in quantity according to weather conditions, dampening the building less or more and turning its spaces into basins of fluctuating capacity.

Spacial fragments are connected through condensed or extended manoeuvred transition fragments. Navigation from one to the other can be consequential or through by-pass routes. Spaces are discovered either as surprises in the middle of a drift or in moments of collision where one gets a glimpse of far away spaces and orients himself.

C. Relation between the project and the wider social context

The project hovers between different humidity conditions, between isolation spaces and common ones, between a continuing condition and moments of change, between far away and close by. It is a collage of contradicting conditions and atmospheres. At the same time there is an environmental aspect of the project. Cities, like Brussels in my case, are designed so that rainwater
is quickly sent away not taking into account the limitation of water sources. My proposal on the other hand aims to maintain rain water in a public space giving it a new function. An actual situation of flooding in the city of Brussels that is not being tackled and therefore becomes unpleasant , turns into a advantage with the creation of baths. Through my proposal a flood changes completely a spatial urban fragment providing an opportunity for people of the city to inhabitate the water of the floods, the water of their own city. It is not only about designing an atmospheric space but also about dealing with extra water coming from the rain and the flooding of the canal in a way that is used, recycled and not wasted. My proposal gives an answer to how to deal with floods by slowing down water flow, purifying it and reclaim it. The building is designed so that in periods of drought most of its spaces can still be used in other ways.

Natural materials are used so that the structure partly absorbers moisture as well. The intervention is establishing a periphery condition in between central areas. It’s natural character with wet and planted spaces creates an in between condition relating the conditions of the centre of Brussels with the conditions of the canal which at this moment seem to be abruptly disconnected. In the Public Baths of Brussels there is the possibility of isolation and concentration but also the possibility of gathering and playing with water, as both are essential in the way we inhabit water. The building adapts to the environment and weather conditions but also to how people use it, or not. As in the end it can even be just a floodplain.