Reflection

Project:
Social interaction strategies in historic buildings.
Binnengasthuis area.

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Date: 18/01/2016
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1. Abstract.
The location is the Binnengasthuis-area; a zone within the UNESCO World Heritage site of Amsterdam and a campus of the University of Amsterdam. This master thesis examines the influences of the existing building on a transformation design. Why does a certain intervention based on social activities work well with one building but is not relevant in other buildings? Is this influenced by the characteristics of the existing building or by the social function type or both? Where lies the friction between different stages of social encounter – the gradation from public to private – and how can this be defined? Gaining insight in this process can help to identify the opportunities and the threats of the design. This research focuses on the specific group of existing institutional buildings in the city center. The influence of the entrance and its social changes has been examined in a literature research. Next to this theoretical research, a design research is obtained. Within this research a transformation design is made for two buildings which differ in characteristics and therefore in functional possibilities and design outcomes. In total four main methods are captured. They influenced the design from the urban scale until the detailed scale. The following points of this reflection are aiming to gain insight on the design approach, process and product.

2. The relationship between the project and the wider social context.
The amount of students is increasing in the vibrant city of Amsterdam. To cope with this growth the University of Amsterdam, also known as the UvA, has the ambition to remain the quality of education by stimulating a more ambitious study culture between the students, teachers and researchers. This means that study spaces in buildings have to be used efficiently in order to located to as many people as possible. At the same time, the UvA wants to remain the campus atmosphere in the evening hours. However, the amount of student activities in the evening and the relation between the current residents and the institutional buildings is limited. Adding more housing will have the positive outcome as it adds more liveliness to the area and it will retain a certain amount of students in the evening. Also, by adding housing possibilities to the area, the UvA will respond to the growing housing demand, more specific student housing. After analyzing the living preferences of students, it became clear that students would like to have more private facilities or live in independent studios. This means that the ‘old fashioned’ student housing in which the students share almost every facility is not sufficient anymore. This also means that upcoming residential buildings for students should find new ways of bringing students together to prevent isolation of the individual. The student corporations are constantly developing and experimenting with new student housing typologies with new building. However they are limited by the monumental statuses of buildings within the historic city. During my gradation project I tried to find new ways of bringing students together in historic buildings, in this case
originally isolated from the city life. With my social interaction strategy I was striving to bring back the social private courtyards by concentrating the main entrances on the site. This will reduce the fragmentation and increase the qualitative intimate spaces on the site, which is the strength of the area. I also focused on giving new meanings to the facades, which were originally designed as backsides, by exploring the possibilities of modern materialization without forming too much contrast with the existing to retain a coherent expression to the area. And a final tool was by designing the interior with multifunctional transition zones so that the encounter areas in the will be constantly linked to each other and this will be seen from the outside by the interventions in the facades. The result of the design is a fresh way of looking at social interaction possibilities within the historic building and with its surroundings.

3. The relationship between the theme of the graduation lab and the subject chosen by the student within this framework.
The theme of the graduation studio was housing in historic inner city. Even though a housing program is going against the initial intention of this enclave in the city, the housing assignment has become a tool to involve the area slightly more into the city. During the graduation year, themes of housing were investigated and summarized in the booklet "elements of housing"; the street, the facade, the entrance, the rooms, the flexibility, the structure, the energy, the function housing and work and the function house and shop. The elements of housing resulted in design proposals for the Binnengasthuis-area, which varied per person. My element of housing was the entrance, in which I research the different aspects of the entrance per housing typology and the social change of the entrance in general. The entrance is an important factor in the urban environment and in the residential building. A clear entrance will lead to a better urban environment. It should always include a defined in-between zone, which can provide a social base and include the appropriate materialization. By analyzing the entrances on the Binnengasthuis-area I tried to find the most important values, which determine the restrictions and lead to the opportunities of the area and the internal entrances.

4. The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student.
The Heritage & Architecture department focuses designing with heritage. Besides the architectural and the technical aspects of the interventions, the design becomes a revaluation of the existing in which the complexity of the heritage is understood and used in terms of cultural heritage. The following illustration explains the methodical line I have followed. After the analysis, the role of the value assessment is to determine what is important to remain, why and in which aspects the complex/building can be strengthened. Together with the social problem, this lead to a research question.

"Which strategies can strengthen the social interactions and make the buildings of Binnengasthuisterrein more visible to the city?"

In order to answer this question, I choose to work with two buildings with different programs to compare the design solutions. In the end there was a rotation between the last three steps. The final product differs from what I had in mind during P2. I have come to the conclusion that there is no need to connect the buildings if there is no traffic crossing point in the urban plan. Besides, adding a large
volume in the middle was not a part of the intention of the buildings; it would lead to an imaginary design in which the limited amount of natural daylight would make the buildings very unpleasant. The phrase “less is more” became very applicable for this design project.

5. The relationship between research and design in the graduation project. As the illustration above explains, research and design were very much linked to each other during the design project. Although, findings of the research had to be adjusted to the design, this made it possible to focus the design goal. My fascination within this graduation project was the theme of human contact. By the theory of Herztberger I became aware of the importance of human contact. I became less focused on the expression of the facade and thought more in terms of “what kind of advantage does this intervention has for the user?” I went much more in depth in the meaning of a space such as an entrance. The space is more than proportions, light and materialization. It also about stimulation of the human interaction, the optimal use and a constant thinking of what is “gezelliger”?

I concluded that this cosiness and togetherness could already start on the urban situation, by the position of the entrances of the buildings; close to each other. A second conclusion was that the interventions in the plinth nearby the entrance were very important to form a dialog between the human activity inside and the street. A new materialization type was needed in order to give the originally backside the attention that it was lacking. When removing the plasters from the current housing block and apply the same kind materials to the facade, the entire site becomes much more coherent. A third conclusion is that the circulation space in the buildings can be the link between different learning spaces or an extension of the private space. Here, materialization can contribute in the delineation of what is public and what is private or what is in-between. A fourth conclusion was about the visual relations within the building and how it is visible towards the environment.