P5 REFLECTION
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FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE
Chair of Interiors Buildings Cities

STUDIO Maastricht, City of Stone
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ASSIGNMENT

The overarching MSc3 and MSc4 theme of the chair of Interiors Buildings Cities was *The Urban Institution*, which in turn fitted into the chair’s year theme of *The City as an Archive*. The studio *Maastricht, City of Stone* subsequently deals with local material culture and the specific use of natural stone in Maastricht.

The studio’s assignment called for the design of a new ceramics centre in Maastricht, combining the archives of the city’s main manufacturers Sphinx, Société Céramique and Mosa. Moreover, the building should house a substantial exhibition and offer workspaces for contemporary ceramics artists.

A location in the centre of Maastricht was assigned to us—a narrow plot of circa 25 x 70 metres facing the *Capucijnenstraat*, sandwiched between an 18th-century gatehouse and a 1950s fire station. Towards the back of the plot, a new, small-scale housing development is being realised that breaks with the historic urban fabric.

RESEARCH

The research done prior to (and during) the design phase fell into three categories:

- Architectural research on (in)formality and visual perception
- Site analysis with specific attention to industrial heritage
- Anthropological research on threshold spaces and liminality

For the investigation into (in)formality, a series of nine historic residential buildings was chosen in the centre of Maastricht. Using *Gestalt* theory and its principles of visual perception, the question was asked what makes these houses appear (in)formal to us. Through reduction drawings, the front façades were abstracted and broken down into elements, focusing on composition and the use of natural stone. From this comparison, we distilled several themes that seemed to contribute to the (in)formal appearance of the façades.

Historic analysis of the project site, a former home to public utility companies, led to a wider investigation into Maastricht’s industrial heritage. Archival research revealed the tremendous impact of the ceramics industry on the city’s development throughout the last two centuries.

Parallel to the architectural and site research, an anthropological study was carried out that focused on threshold spaces and liminal moments in everyday life. As a field research, I followed a student of Interior Architecture in Maastricht on her daily commute from her house and her school, documenting
her actions and experiences along the way through photography and writing. I believe this research has given me some valuable insights that can be used when designing threshold spaces, but the topic was perhaps too disconnected from the theme of the studio. It might have been better to choose a topic relating more to Maastricht’s use of natural stone.

DESIGN PROCESS
Throughout the design process, the question of how all these themes and research topics could come together into a coherent project continually lingered in the background. In the end, it proved very difficult to address all these topics simultaneously. Looking back, I believe I should have narrowed my scope and focused on one or two topics at most. This would then perhaps result in a more focused, clear and coherent design.

During the preliminary design phase, the research on industrial heritage formed my main source of inspiration, while temporarily setting aside the other gathered information. The idea of the factory as a typological starting point for the design appealed to me for several reasons. Firstly, it refers directly to the industrial scale on which ceramics was produced in the centre of Maastricht, and as such allows the architecture of the building to become an integral part of the exhibition. Secondly, it refers to the history of the project site, which used to house the city’s public utility companies. Lastly, traces of inner city factories can still be found throughout Maastricht, and the project is thus a historic continuation of urban form.

This reference also proved to be helpful in organising the programme and volumes of my proposal, but I had difficulties with reintroducing the research subjects of (in)formality and threshold spaces into my design. Or, conversely, you could say it was difficult to let go of the idea of the factory in order to move on. This led to a relative standstill in the development of my proposal, because I was struggling with the design of my façades. Combining the results of the research on (in)formality with the idea of the factory proved troublesome. But in the end, I managed to translate the language of building with stone into a contemporary form, using precast concrete elements instead of natural stone.

Something that turned out to be of great help was switching between different scales. Designing on a 1:200 as well as a 1:20 scale, I could clearly notice one starting to influence the other. This had a positive effect on decision making and speeding up the design process.
Another method I plan on utilising more is writing down my (preliminary) position and reflections regarding the main themes of the assignment, because it helps to clarify ideas and strengthens the design proposal.

Within the chair of Interiors Buildings Cities, the use of physical models as a design tool is generally encouraged. I, too, believe that this is an excellent way of judging spatial quality and improving the design. One model can contain as much information as an entire set of drawings, perhaps even more. Yet, throughout the design process, time constraints have kept me from regularly making and updating models, which is something I regret now, since it could have improved my design significantly.

SOCIAL CONTEXT
A question that I have tried to answer through my project is how a contemporary urban institution might take its place within the city. While being aware of its historic reputation as being elitist and imposing, I have attempted to create a building that embodies openness and permeability, both spatially and programmatically. This is achieved not only through making the workshop and archive part of the public exhibition, but also by the choice of ‘simple’ materials and the building’s face towards the street. This results in a ceramics centre that is welcoming and humble, rather than intimidating and imperious.