Reflection on Thesis Project

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Studio: Architecture & Dwelling | MSc3/4 studio 2011-2012 At Home in the City | Amsterdam
Thesis Project: An Open Building Project as Urban Catalyst
Site: Gershwin Cluster 1, Zuidas, Amsterdam
Thesis Research: Appropriation within Dwellings: Designing for Growth and Adaptation

The goal of my studio: At Home in the city of Amsterdam is to achieve “a design of dwelling ensemble in the city of Amsterdam and its direct environment with active functions if necessary, founded on 1. A profound analysis of the site; 2. A research about a field/ theme related to the theme of the studio; 3. Design studies: architectural models and studies”. My design proposal is such an outcome widely based on the findings and conclusions from these researches.

The title of my theme research in cooperation with two other students is “Appropriation within Dwellings: Designing for Growth and Adaptation”. It was inspired by the awareness among many architects that the highly prescriptive approach of mass housing has estranged dwellings and buildings from their users, and their efforts of providing a sort of “support” and “infill” systems that allow a variety of appropriation or evolution according to different needs of users. According to John Habraken, one of the most prestigious figures related to open buildings, “A support involves those decisions over which the community has control; The detachable unit (infill) is that area over which the individual decides.” In our research we didn’t only compare the specific architectonic approach in these case studies, but also in a more anthropological way, we invested the actual intervention over time that have been made within dwellings as an responding to architects’ tensions. By doing these, we found what kind of architectural feature could better trigger the appropriation of the dwelling space in a long term or short term, what other factors could encourage or hinder these practice and how the combination of these factors works. One of the architectural approaches implemented in Herman Hertzberger’s project Diagoonwoningen has been proved to be able to highly encourage the appropriation of dwelling space in a long term. The principle of spatial organization of Diagoonwoningen that different levels with half storeys height in between are connected to basic cores was a starting point to develop my own prototype for dwelling units. While the influence of other non-architecture factors are also kept in mind during my design as an anthropological or praxeological indication.

The site I chose is Gershwin Cluster 1, Zuidas. Zuidas has been planned to be a living area with mixed functions and a second center of Amsterdam. But after field work and interviews we found the area currently only gives impression of a business area due to the overwhelming office towers which have been erected during the early phase of the development in Zuidas. Our project in Gershwin Cluster 1 is planned to be completed in very near future with designated programs. Thus the very first dwellers here will have to wait for decades to see a fully developed Zuidas with all those desirable facilities that they could be related to on a day to day base and feel at home and a sense of belonging in the neighborhood. To solve this problem, the referred support and infill approach from my group research could be also perfectly resorted to on the scale of neighborhood. In my design, offices are raised along the streets with spaces underneath for uncertain programs. The construction of offices functions as the support with a long life span.

Fig 01: spatial organization of Diagoonwoningen
The construction for uncertain programs will be lightweight construction as infill which could be built, removed or changed responsively according to the changing environment. On the scale of dwelling, the concept of open building is also implemented. To achieve a high density, these dwellings that allow adaptation and growth are organized within a system named apartment cluster which consists of a solid part accommodating all basic functions for an apartment and a void part with areas where the dwellers could choose the external configuration from a catalogue for more emotional manifestation. Furthermore, within the same rule of external configuration, it’s possible to close more spaces in these areas for future needs. Thus the outcome of this project is a collection of decision of architects and all related users which could actively contribute to the generation of the new urban context. And the coexistence of diverse urban functions with inviting public spaces that are articulated by the tailor-made “support and infill” system could actually function as an urban catalyst to activate the site and neighboring areas.

Nowadays it has been more convinced that the idea of open building or flexible building would have meaningful value to a sustainable neighborhood or even city, which has increasingly perused by the architects all over the world. If compared those realized open building project, all of them have different “support and infill” systems. For some of them as Next 21, there’re more independent two systems as support and infill. For Molenvliet, the function of infill is more dependent on the support which to some extend constrain the control level of the users. For my project, for the support and infill system on the scale of neighborhood, the control level of the users will be high because of the construction of the infill is totally detached from the support. For the apartment cluster system that I designed to accommodate the various lifestyle and external configurations, the control level seems a bit lower. Because in the academic environment, a lot of design elements are pre-decided without actual communication with the users or clients. But I believe within this innovative split floor system, although the options for the external configuration is limited, but the spatial condition itself will trigger a lot of interesting appropriation from indoor to outdoor space and create an incredible positive relationship between the inhabitants and the community and between the neighbors of the same apartment cluster.