The assignment in the graduation studio of Interiors, Buildings and Cities involved the design of a university library in the inner city of Amsterdam, on a location chosen out of four designated sites. The result of the graduation project is a design for a University Centre on the Frederiksplein, consisting out of an Academic library, a Study Centre and a Cultural Centre. This report describes the methods and argumentation that preceded the research and design done during the graduation phase and reflects upon the results of the graduation project.

1. The relationship between research and design

The research done within the graduation studio was very much linked to the design. Within the course of the MSc historical, theoretical and contextual research was done on the location (innercity of Amsterdam and the four designated design locations) and on the typology and significance of the program (a university library). These site analyses and theoretical papers resulted in the choice of the location of the Frederiksplein. A precedent catalogue of several (academic) libraries determined an understanding of the programmatic topic. An anthropological research on users of the university library gave a more empirical backdrop for the design. The results of the researches were combined to form a basis for a personal position on the assignment. The research did not lead to explanation of what the contemporary university library by definition should be, but the results of the research functioned as a framework to which the design project can be related, referred and understood. As such it formed the basis for a personal position of the project and the location and it let to a first concept for a design. Within this concept the various topics of the research such as the urban setting and implication on the city, the social and cultural meaning for the city, the approach of the spatial distribution of program, atmospheric qualities and potentials, and the implications on the structural elaboration were incorporated.

During the course of the MSc, the research merged more into the design. Spatial and structural elaboration had a great emphasize on the design process. The research was implemented as a research-by-design, and has therefore been a more intuitive process than the delineated researches of the MSc. Different proposals and possibilities have been tried out by making sketches, drawings, models and diagrams, and adjusted according to a set of criteria based on the personal position developed during the initial stage of the project. In this part, the research made on precedents played a significant role as a framework of reference, and was complemented during the project with other (non-library) precedents that related to more specific topics in the project. The use of precedents helped to clarify the design scheme and to understand the implications of the decisions made, and as well helped to sharpen the previously established criteria.

2. Relationship between the theme of the studio and the subject/case study chosen by the student within this framework.

The theme of the studio is the public interior, described by the department as follows: “We see the city as a place of values, expressed in the way the city is made and the relations between people in space that the city implies and builds. Our department is concerned with the shared spaces of the city, those spaces of the city’s interior where people meet and are aware of each other.”

In our graduation studio this connoted that the project, being a university library, has to make a statement on its relation towards the city of Amsterdam, and to its use by and implications on the users and inhabitants, in
other words, to its cultural and collective meaning for the city of Amsterdam.

The historical importance of the chosen location of the Frederiksplein, that used to house the Paleis van Volksvlijt, has been researched in order to create an understanding of its former cultural and collective meaning for the city and its potential for the design of a university library today. The theme of the public interior was expressed in the (collective) research as an important aspect of the analyses of the precedents. The importance of the user was carried out in the anthropological research, where the demands of student for a study place were investigated.

In my design the theme of the public interior emerged on different scales of the project and came eventually to the fore in the carefully design of the facades. On an urban scale I propose three building volumes and therefore I break up the program into a more introverted library building containing the collection of books and contemplative study spaces, and two communal buildings containing the more collective and public functions like collective study places, education spaces, and cultural and public facilities. The activation of the plinth in the two communal buildings has its implications on the exterior of the plan, that is the main square around which the three buildings are situated and the adjacent streets of the site. However, the theme of the public interior is even more elaborated in the more introvert library building. With its palatial qualities this building can be identified as a public interior, represented in the urban figure in the city as well as in the rooms within the building.

The great attention paid to the design of the facades is a result of this notion of the public interior. Although the main concept of all the facades is equal, subtle differentiations in proportions and positions are implemented in the three buildings to incorporate their differences in meaning.

3. The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the studio and the method chosen by the student in this framework

Within the methodical line of approach of the studio a great amount of time has been spent on the initial research and its implementation. The development of a personal position on the context and the assignment, determined by the input of the research results, took most part of the MSc3 course in order to create a strong base of argumentations for the design. In the MSc4 the focus shifted from the cultural statement of the project into the materialization and specification of the atmospheres and spatial qualities of the building and its technical elaboration.

The concretization of the personal position into an actual building, and the explicit task not to concretize the project in the early stage helped to construct the argumentations for the project and to understand the meaning of the project in a social and cultural context. These argumentations helped to focus on the individual themes of the project and directed the conceptual scheme into a materialized design.

4. The relationship between the project and the wider social context

The wider social context of the project relates to the situation of the inner city of Amsterdam and to the function of a (university) library.

The library is one of the oldest building typologies, as a place for gathering and processing knowledge and by that, as a place for cultural memory. The traditional library was focused on accessibility and assimilation of knowledge, and performed on a social level as a cultural (privileged) place with certain grandeur.

Currently as a consequence of the changes in forms of information and collection by digitalization, the traditional library is transforming and shifting towards a place that attempts to get its success by the release of the physical presence of the books, resulting in buildings that are like 'landscapes of learning', carried out as open and social public domains, like the Rolex Learning Centre by SANAA, that however often lack the atmospheric character and specificity that the traditional library did enhance.

It is the combination of the expressiveness of the classical library and the openness and sociability of the contemporary tendency of the learning centre that stresses out the relevance of my project and confirms the statement I make with it.