Topia Conclusa; the limitless landscapes of Overmaze

P5 Reflection

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Explrelab 18
Explorelab: A Personal Fascination & a Problem Statement

As I write this reflection in the beginning of November, while nearing the finalisation of my graduation year, I look back a full twelve months and think of the moment when I decided to explore. I wanted to, because I wanted to see beyond the general discourse of architecture, to seek out and research deeper relations existing between architecture and the world that it aims to influence and shape. I believe that this need to explore has steered me towards the ExploreLab Studio from the very start of my Masters. In past projects I have found this tendency too, where my intention has been to find the boundaries of the assignment at hand. When my persistent fascination with the prison, which I shared with friend and fellow graduating student Stefan Vriend, became an increasingly relevant subject within the Netherlands we decided to research this further, and fully submerge ourselves into the subject under the guidance of ExploreLab.

The Prison has a central role in our collective imagination. It is represented in political debate, films, television, video games and the Internet. For most it is an abstract entity that somehow protects society from the criminal “other”, by detaining him, punishing him and reforming him. Apart from this public character and its inherent closed off characteristics, the prison also functions as a political instrument, as it “embodies the largest power the state exercises over its citizens in times of peace.” ¹ As an architectural object, we can see the prison as a physical solution to a paradoxical societal problem, namely that incarceration must punish and reform. It seems fair to say that this central societal role of the prison is a complex one.

Contemporary changes in the Dutch penal system, instigated in 2013, will result (and are already resulting) in the closing of nineteen penitentiaries within the Netherlands. Since this decision is purely financially motivated, there is little to no consideration of a future for these buildings. This is specifically problematic because the inflexible nature of these buildings does not allow for straightforward reuse.

My graduation research was thus conceived as an attempt to create a greater understanding of these buildings, both in their historical context and their physical reality, and maybe inspire a new approach.

Exploration through Research Remnants of Reform

In order to fully appreciate and assess the potential of the prison building for future use, we first needed to create a better understanding of these prison buildings in the light of both their theory and their reality. Early on in the research we found that the prison as a type has come forth — at least partially — out of the optimistic or normative idea that imprisonment in a completely controlled environment could have a beneficial influence on the soul of the prisoner. Two contrasting views on the concept of reform have determined the prison system and its architecture, and we soon realized that by juxtaposing two analyses of these reform theories and the architecture they brought forth, we could aim to expose the relation between a system of thought and its physical (architectural) expression.

Central to the research has therefore been the question:

*In what way does prison architecture attempt to reform human behaviour?*

This question is explored from multiple angles over the course of four written chapters, a process which has ultimately resulted in a realisation which is both sobering as well as liberating: prison architecture cannot force reform upon its prisoners. It is my belief that reform, as in bringing one back to the norm, cannot be forced. Not in the prison, not anywhere.

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Exploration through Design

During the research process, in which the two forms of reform in the prison were juxtaposed, I became fascinated with Overmazel Prison in Maastricht, which was built in 1975 as the first social prison in the Netherlands. From the very start of the graduation year it has been my goal to seek a meaningful way to redesign this building: to create an intervention that simultaneously works with and challenges the original reformatory character of the building.

In this process, the research and the resulting understanding of the prison building, its functioning and its historical development have been of utmost importance to all aspects of the design. This newly gained knowledge didn’t just help in modifying the existing layout of the building, but more importantly it has shaped a narrative, the context in which the design has meaning. All the design decisions can be explained on their own terms, but they really gain their significance in the context that the research provides.

Through this narrative, which was fuelled by the research conclusion mentioned above, I attempt to explore the concept of freedom, and its perceptibility to the architectural confine. Instead of pursuing the lost ideal of resocialization as it lies embedded within the architecture of Overmazel, I turn the concept around: Overmazel ceases to be an institution where one is prepared for a place in society, and instead becomes a sanctuary to those who chose to live outside of its control. For those who are willing to live on this island in the periphery of Maastricht, absolute freedom can exist within its walls, or so my design seeks to evoke.

This narrative has undoubtedly given the design the needed depth. However, it has also has proven challenging, for I have never designed both a script and a building before, something that goes beyond the typical programmatic ventures that I have encountered in past design processes. An additional difficulty here was the fact that the coercive character of the prison seemed to seep through every aspect of its being, something I encountered as I struggled to break free from the existing architectural plan.

Relevance; Personal and Discursive

As I write this reflection in the beginning of November, while nearing the finalisation of my graduation year, I believe that I have succeeded in the goals I set for myself when I started exploring. Both in my research and design I think I have found ways to move beyond the limits generally ascribed to the discourse of architecture. As such I feel I developed a greater understanding of the relation existing between architecture and the world that it aims to influence and shape, thus more clearly than ever before understanding my role as architect within the field, and within society at large.

The societal relevance of the prison is evident, and I hope that with our research Stefan and I have contributed to the on-going exploration of this complex subject. The research however does also bear relevance in a bigger (architectural) scientific framework. Architects often claim to be able to influence, promote and/or determine human behaviour and experience with their architecture, in the Netherlands also referred to as ‘maakbaarheid’. In this discussion the prison is an extreme example of a coercive building, backed by an institution, which aims to achieve certain human behaviour. As such I strongly believe that this research is a valuable contribution to the discussion on the role of behaviourism in the architectural discourse.

I do not believe that we are prisoners of architecture (as Koolhaas would like us to believe), but that architecture is a prisoner of our traditions, market economy and customs that exist within the discipline and society at large. It is perhaps the responsibility of architects to employ our designs not as answers to questions, but as ‘speech acts’ in a discussion; a discussion that tries to mediate negotiations of space and power in a constructive way between equals, not one that only enforces control. It is the blessing and curse of architecture that its object eventually is a material one, a curse because it can be misunderstood as a definitive answer to a badly posed question and a blessing because
it serves a material need. By providing these answers we might learn from our own mistakes, of which the prison might very well be one. But in the end it is not up to architecture or architects alone to make that decision.