Figure and Abstraction:
A contemporary interpretation of ‘building with stone’

Interiors, buildings and cities
Graduation Studio: Maastricht, City of Stone
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The theme was inspired by the Conservatorium in Maastricht. In the first glance, the abstraction of the monolithic block seems to state its position as a modern building from the 1960s. But if looked closely at the detail, the combination of a stone grid and its brick infill on the facade seems to derive from the figure of a traditional building in Maastricht. The stone elements are put together in a similar manner to the load-bearing beams and columns in a typical stone construction. The fact that they are no more than a thin layer of veneer being cladded on the surface of building, concealing the concrete structure behind while also giving a certain indication of what is behind, gives the building a unique character, and set it apart from the other building in Maastricht, both traditional and modern.

In the Conservatorium, the use of natural stone and brick together generate a figurative layer that evokes the memory of how stone was used in the past, and it is made even stronger with the abstraction of the grid and the volume. In its detailing, the actual thickness of the stone elements are exposed, and such ‘honesty’ has a deeper meaning in this particular context: in a city such as Maastricht, with a long tradition of using stone in construction, what does a contemporary building offer to its material culture? And what constitutes the ‘authenticity’, when we talked about making a ‘stone building’ today?
There was a time when stone extracted from the local quarry was a common building material. On the other hand, the imported stones were considered as a luxury for their scarceness. And nowadays the foreign stones become kitschy options because they are so cheap and easily available, while the blue limestone is recognized as the ‘authentic’ material in Maastricht. In spite of whatever name or price-tag it is given, stone remains stone, and all the different kinds share the same/similar property, whether it is from China or Belgium. It is surprising that how the change of culture can influence the use of material. In Maastricht the stones used to be stacked on each other, making the structure visible and creating depth and heaviness on the facade. Yet it is also questionable that, if the tradition of constructing with stone lies in the massive components. Or is it somewhere else? Looking back into the Conservatorium, does the cladding of stone and the lack of depths on the facade betray its intention to be a real ‘stone building’? Or does the composition of its facade embody a different kind of ‘authenticity’, the one that sees the figure as an instrument to bring the meaning and memory of stone, back into the minimalism of a modern building?