1 RESEARCH AND DESIGN

1.1 FINAL DESIGN
Goal of this project was to make a design of the Depot de la Plaine and its direct surroundings and thereby integrating it in the urban structure of the Plaine Saint-Denis making use of the specific qualities of the location and the buildings themselves.

To achieve this three topics of research were to be combined in one design. A research on the location and buildings, research on the program and research on architectural expression.

The depot is made part of its surroundings again by providing a public space that is lacking in its surroundings. There is very little public green in the direct surroundings and the green that is available has an urban character. The plot is opened to the surroundings but uses its seclusion in the form of a landscape park that can be seen as an oasis of space and peace within a dense urban setting. In addition to the public park the buildings provide facilities for the surroundings while the patients, visitors and employees can be an impulse for other public functions nearby. A rehabilitation center offers jobs for high-educated employees, which are lacking within the Plaine Saint-Denis.

In the design there are two types of visible interventions. A series of concrete structures that start already in the park and are continued within the building. The entrances are part of these structures. This intervention is at times visibly invasive on the existing building. Parts of the building are demolished to make way. These structures are important for the connection of the buildings and the surroundings, like wise interventions would be necessary for different functions than a rehabilitation center.

Second intervention is that of the building volumes for the Rehab functions. This intervention is less invasive and often reversible. This has to do with the nature of the function (ideas on healthcare facilities vary) so flexibility is important to keep in mind when designing a rehab center. If big changes have to be made to the existing building which are not by definition of added value, to make a very specific function possible a different function could be explored instead saving the existing building.

The design has not provided an answer for the entire railway zone of which the Depot plaine-Saint Denis is a part. Instead existing plans for this area have followed in the new design.

1.2 PROCESS
The relationship between this research and the designing has not worked well during the early process. Starting points and an ambition based on the research on the program and incomplete research on structuralism were formulated while not taking into account conclusions that should have been made.
based on the research on the location and building that was in that time still incomplete. In what I would now describe as an error-and-trial like process a dead end path has been followed based on those starting points and ambitions. The ambition of this path of finding one scalable repeatable element has not been completed in the final design notions of repetition and scale on which the ambition was based are still part of the design, thou be it in a different shape.

At first the proposed method for the design phase has not been effective because I have not followed it as I should have. I had prematurely formulated starting points and ambitions for the design that were incompatible with the existing situation or at least beyond my reach and I was for a period of time unwilling to let these go.

After being stuck for a while further research on the existing situation and the architectural research have provided starting points for a new direction for the design. This time the proposed method was more effective for a more proper chronological order was followed resulting in a concept with more flexibility to deal with exceptions based on either the program or the existing situation with the possibility to tackle problems as is instead of trying to find one answer solving all.

Crucial decisions during the process for the design were:
- to work with a repeating structure for the new within the old responding to the measure of repetition within the existing building
- To have two opposing entrances in the building directly connected with a corridor to a third entrance creating a public area within the building.
- To continue elements of the park to the interior of the building characterizing the open space within the halls as an intermediate between different rehabilitation functions and the park.

2 STUDIO APPROACH

Within the RMIT studio there is an emphasis on research of the existing situation and object resulting in a value assessment as starting point for the design. Though be it rather late in the process this value assessment has been a useful tool during the design phase.

I had failed to complete the value assessment early on in process and yet continued on with my design resulting in a dead end. I had not completed this assessment early due to a commitment to other courses early in the process (History Thesis) and because most of the documents necessary for the research were hard to come by and not available to me when I first required them. A second trip to Le Mans, France, was necessary to visit the archives of the SNCF, the national railway company, in order to find some drawings of the existing complex as the local archives did not keep drawings of the complex owned by the railway company.

Through a chance encounter with a local resident and SNCF employee contact was made with a French architect who had done research on the complex who was able to provide some additional drawings.

A visit to the buildings was not possible due to collapse danger.

Even when the necessary documentation was available to me I did not immediately complete my research on the existing situation and building but was instead working on a design without a proper understanding of the existing situation. First because I rushed as I wanted to graduate within the shorter timeframe and later because I was committed to a concept in which the existing situation was inferior to the new to be designed structure. After realizing that neither would achieve me a satisfying result and would have to take a different path a new focus on the existing situation and completion of the research provided new starting points and better grasp of the scale of the complex. Especially the 3d models, both
scale models and digital models have been useful tools for they also provided an idea of the interior of the buildings.

In my position paper I made a pledge for a praxis in heritage architecture free of morals as morality can turn into dogmas as virtues on which morality is based can not be proven or disproven. Instead the reason behind the ideas of morals should be considered as morals can often be explained by their fulfilment of desires or causing of sorrows. Here I find an important notion that one can only do what seems to fulfill desires of certain groups but never has certainty whether the effects will be positive on the short or long term.

This position translates in a situational (no universal standard) and passive (no certainty) relation to heritage. Changes to the heritage that are necessary in the foreseeable future to once again make use of the buildings should be made but if not necessary do not have to be invasive. The existing is not beyond question but if not necessary for future use not inferior to the new either.

The approach of the design I followed early on during the design phase was not a logical result of this position. The new was forced and the existing subservient to the new. The new path that was followed which has resulted in the final design was a more logical result of this position. The new is on many points reversible and following the existing whereas if necessary the existing was altered to fit the context and function. (entrances, façade openings etc.)

3 RESEARCH SUBJECT AND STUDIO THEME

Theme of the studio is the renovation of (industrial) heritage in the north-east region of Paris and its suburbs. The object I have chosen, a building complex formerly used for the reparation and remise of locomotives is in line with this theme. The function I have chosen is a rehabilitation center. The relation or even friction between this object and the function has been an important aspect for the design from early on. The research of the function has been done by using reference projects and literature. The literature on ideas of the healing environment and evidence based design have provided an important input during the design process during all stages. The reference projects have been inspiring examples and helped formulate and understand the program. The program, in combination with the existing complex has resulted in important themes for the design. Among those themes were scale, level of finish and public/private spaces. The existing building had large halls up to a length of 158m and the vast scale of the buildings are characteristic for the complex whereas for a rehabilitation center many rooms are required that are suitable for one person. The complex is formerly used for the reparation of locomotives, an industrial process. It is rough in both materialization and finish while in a rehabilitation center there is a high standard for climate conditions and hygienics. The complex itself is traditionally secluded from its environment and while privacy is an important aspect in a rehabilitation center the buildings and the site should be easily approachable for patients, visitors and third party users of the shared facilities.

Though the program has been important for the development of the design it took quite some time to understand. Initially one of the reasons to choose for this program was the match I thought was there between the functions that require large spaces within a rehabilitation center (lobby, sports hall, fitness, swimming pool & restaurant) and the vast scale of the existing complex. The rest of the program could then be fitted in smaller units within the halls. At first I had underestimated the area necessary for supportive functions in comparison to patient rooms and treatment rooms.

Though the existing building is of added value to the new function the function does not have a lot of added value to the existing building. The number of large rooms was limited causing a need for a lot of new construction within the existing building thereby dividing up the large spaces. The existing building makes for interesting spaces between the building volumes for rehab specific functions.
4 SOCIAL RELEVANCE

The combination between industrial heritage and healthcare building I think is also what’s interesting in a wider social context. The plot, an abandoned railway complex is somewhat secluded from its direct surroundings and was within its context not suitable for a highly public function. Instead the program is compatible to the highly public area nearby. It provides certain facilities for its surroundings (sports hall, activity rooms, park) while also hosting a socially important function (rehabilitation center) on a location where within a small range, so with little mobility, a wide variety of environments can be found.

In many European cities railway complexes where built in the edge of the city in the 19th century. Often the cities have expended and has the complexes gone out of use. In situations like these the location could be interesting for healthcare functions as there is space for a relatively large complex on interesting urban locations where at the same time these healthcare institutions could share facilities with the surroundings and give an impulse to the area (new and more people, jobs, etc)