Graduation reflection
‘Tussen de bedrijven door’
Bringing city life to Amsterdam

Hybird buildings graduation studio
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Introduction

The Hybrid Building graduation studio focuses on the way an architectural intervention can initiate the process of urban transformation, or as the studio recognises this; bottom up urbanism.

The location for the graduation assignment is central business district (CBD) Zuidas in Amsterdam. The municipality of the city of Amsterdam has decided to submerge the A10 highway running through the CBD, creating space for new buildings. In between the lanes of the A10 highway is a trainstation that needs refurbishment and expansion. These two aspects are the initial motives for the graduation assignment.

CBD Zuidas (image 1) is a densely occupied area in Amsterdam, developed in the 1980's. It is one of largest and most ambitious contemporary urban projects in the Netherlands. It has a strategic location in terms of transportation; it is extremely close to not only a highway, and a railway but also within 15 minutes of an airport. Furthermore it is very well connected to the historic city of Amsterdam by several modes of transportation. It is the single largest example within the Dutch context of a project that is to become a successful internationally orientated economic centre as well as a new urban centre for the city it is located in.

At the time the municipality together with corporate investors agreed on developing CBD Zuidas as a vibrant place with intensive city life, it was meant to become a second city centre for Amsterdam. Eventually CBD Zuidas did not become this lively place, it has become a place monotonously focussed on corporate business unable to facilitate city life.

How or why this happened is mainly due to economical and political reasons, however these won’t be discussed in this reflection. What has been more interesting for my design, since CBD Zuidas has not been completed yet, is to research what CBD Zuidas lacks or needs to improve in order to become the vibrant urban centre as it was primarily intended.
Process

This document contains a reflection of my graduation in the studio of Hybrid Buildings, a studio that concerns interventions in complex urban environments. It provides a summary of the steps I have made and decisions I have taken during the process of designing during my graduation. While describing the process I have tried to critically reflect on specific things.

When abstracting the graduation process I can recognise four phases; research, concept, design and elaboration. The first phase deals with the urban context, analysis of the plot and abstract theory. Apart from gathering information and theorising, the first intuitive ideas for the function of or the program in the building started to come to mind. In the beginning I found it difficult from time to time to remain abstract and rational about these ideas, to try and not create a specific idea or concept too quickly but to do research in order to find interesting starting points and questions and build up an argument by facts. The eventual problem statement for the design could be seen as the end of this phase.

The concept phase was characterised by taking the drawn conclusions from the research and translating these into starting points for a design or a design concepts, most of the time this also meant additional research. In this phase I tried to stimulate myself in creating starting points by doing case studies, but also intuitively researching the plot and studying on masses and compositions.

When preliminary ideas are produced, built on a rational argument supported by the research and the intuitive ideas of composition study the phase of design begins. The starting points are translated into a tangible design or specific elements of design. Construction, building technology, materialisation and sustainability are implemented in this phase.

The concluding elaboration phase now starts. Most of the ‘large’ design decisions have been made, now is the time to execute these decisions. Producing specific products that show what the building will be and how this can be achieved if it were to be build, always keeping in mind the initial design concept and problem statement.

Naturally it barely needs mentioning that these steps were not always as in the stated order and that the process was not linear. I have thought about how the design process could be seen in an alternative way taking into account the fact that it is not progressing linear. Therefore I have also reflected on not necessarily this specific design process but on how I create ideas or how I design. Trying to describe it abstractly without using common research tools/methods I produced a scheme of how I think I work (image 2).

![Image 2: Representation of design method](image 2)
During the course ‘Urban Analysis’ the focus was primarily on the analysis of CBD Zuidas area on multiple urban scales. This course was intended to contribute to define a problem statement or a strategy for the eventual built intervention.

The analysis, performed batch wise, started by mapping information such as history, functions, infrastructure, connectivity, scale, density, morphology, typology, etc. This was mostly done by quantitative analysis represented in numbers or maps. This resulted in rather obvious or generic data which was not representing the lack of city life. Therefore our research group decided to try and research the underlying meaning of this state of CBD Zuidas and tried to approach our research from a more ‘soft’ or intuitive perspective (image 3,4). For example we researched the identity/identities of Amsterdam and how CBD Zuidas relates to this. What position does CBD Zuidas have in the global economic network? What does it mean to the Netherlands? For example we found out that the Netherlands might be small on a global scale but that it has substantial influence (image 5). We also discovered that the Randstad, of which CBD Zuidas is a part, could be seen as one polycentric region (image 6). It is a region of scattered powerful centres that due to its extensive infrastructural network is very well interconnected, as a region it is able to compete with large economic cities such as London or New York. Although this region is not recognised in the global economic network, it functions as such.

Another method conducting research I performed was writing a research paper based on existing literature. Especially the anthropological perspective I learned to take by reading Marc Augé’s ‘Non-places’ I found very interesting.

‘If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.’ Without directly researching CBD Zuidas itself but the abstract mechanisms and structures of a non-place I got a better understanding of how CBD Zuidas works and relates to people.

The research phase has helped me understanding CBD Zuidas in various scales and aspects, eventually comprehending what the meaning of Zuidas is and could be on the local scale on which the built intervention will eventually operate. During the research it also made me aware of the fact that there is a huge responsibility to consider when designing a building for this area, not only will I be designing for the CBD but also for the direct context and for the city regardless of what I will design or what functions I will facilitate. Therefore I see it as an obligation, to a certain extent, to perform extensive powerful before starting to design in order to design to design something meaningful. This is something that I recognise but sometimes still have difficulties with; not trying to start designing too early or think in specific built form based on every small aspect of the research I am conducting or already imagining a complete building from a single fact I just learned. Intuition is good and is a basis for creativity, but I must try to canalise it by objective research.

The research I conducted has not only been a starting point for my design, but also a guideline for making decisions during the design phase. During the entire graduation I have remained conducting research, but as the design progressed the research went from large ideas to specific details.

The problem I stated that is present in CBD Zuidas is dual. Firstly CBD Zuidas is incomplete. On the global economic scale, a world of esteem and appearance in terms of built form, this suggests insufficient economic gravity which may cause deceleration of economic activities in the future. This is mainly present on the edges of CBD Zuidas, unfortunately adjacent to intensively used roads leading to the city of Amsterdam, so it is clearly visible for a large number of people.

Secondly there is a lack of programmatic value on the local scale; mainly the only activity one can undertake in CBD Zuidas is employment.

All of this results in the lack of city life, the low appreciation for CBD Zuidas on the local scale of Amsterdam and to the absent coherence of CBD Zuidas area with the urban context of the city of Amsterdam.
historic sites/buildings
the dam
dwelling
red light district
stock exchange
canals

image 3; identity of historic city centre of Amsterdam

image 6; polycentric region of the Randstad

image 4; geographical centrality of Amsterdam in NW-Europe

image 5; Major nations. World cartograph, dimensions of nations are based on cumulative value of their world cities.
**Studio**

During the research phase I concluded that the initial design motive of the studio, the future submerged A10 highway and the need for refurbishment of the train station is not the most important thing that can be improved in CBD Zuidas.

In our research we found that to make CBD Zuidas more successful the polycentric region of Randstad should be more present to the rest of the world. Since train stations can be seen as gates to cities it would be beneficial to develop a certain typology for the train stations in the Randstad to show that the cities they belong to the same network or region but still keep their own identity. Unfortunately the train stations of Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam and den Hague are already being refurbished. The new designs of these stations are based on an iconic type; aiming to distinguish the station and its city instead of expressing coherency or unity. Therefore this was in my opinion not the most relevant intervention any longer, I decided not to build at the original site suggested by the studio but to use a different location for my intervention.

The motto of the studio, ‘bottom up urbanism’, first came to me as far fetched or perhaps to good to be true. But as the research progressed and as my building took shape through the design process it started to continuously make more sense. My intervention is providing relevant program for the local scale and is seeking connection with the VU campus that also is trying to become a multifunctional and vibrant campus.

On an urban level my intervention tries to make CBD Zuidas look finished by completing the rim of the area. This way the large empty space in Zuidas behind my intervention is hidden from sight of passengers making the area look completed. The reason behind this is that the seemingly finished site generates more esteem and creates a better appearance for CBD Zuidas. Another advantage is that the empty space is more defined once my intervention is completed, making it easier to develop in the future in spatial and programmatic terms. The way I build on the rim leaves options for several future connections with the VU campus and connects CBD Zuidas to the future vibrant mainstreet of the VU campus, hopefully continuing along Zuidas in the future. (Images 7-12).

**Conclusion**

Looking back on the process of my graduation I conclude that the four phases I mentioned earlier have been a good tool to structure my design assignment. Especially forcing myself to remain objective from time to time helped me to find solutions.

Where I first was a little sceptical about the bottom up urbanism I now believe that this can occur in the actual field of architecture. Still I think it might need a somewhat fortunate combination of circumstances to really evoke urban transformation after the intervention itself is completed.
image 7; location: on the edge of CBD Zuidas at the crossing of the Pernassusweg en the Boelelaan

image 10; urban wall making CBD Zuidas seem completed

image 11; defining the remaining space; evoking development, keeping options to connect to the VU campus in the future

image 12; introducing and attracting programmatic value on the local scale.