

P4 Reflection Paper

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Graduation studio: The Architecture of the Interior – The Place of Work

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For my graduation work I have chosen for the studio *The Place of Work* from the chair *The Architecture of the Interior*. The reason why I chose for this project is because I think that the actual place of work is not less important than our house. Of course nowadays much work can also be done from home, but, nevertheless, going to an office is still an important part of the work experience where people don't only come to work on their own, but also to work in teams and interact with their colleagues.

Our studio will focus on the (re-)design of a building in the centre of The Hague, located to the south of The Hague CS. The future development will house two ministries: the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The aim of the design is not only to understand and propose the scheme for the work environment for the civil servants, but also to establish the relationship between the building and the existing public realm.

In this paper I want to look back at my design process, how the goal for my project got formulated and what influenced certain design decisions.

Research

The research phase took place during the first several months of the graduation studio. First of all we have visited the existing building and the surroundings. Visiting the site is very important in order to really understand the existing structure, organization and the atmosphere of the building. As the building is rather large it is difficult to be able to consider all the possible interventions individually, so, as a team we have done a research on the possible interventions. This exercise gave us ideas to different alterations possible on the building. These two exercises helped me understand better which changes should be made in order to improve the building and change it to fit my design goals.

Another part of the research had to do with understanding the structure and the work ethics of the ministries that are to be housed in the redeveloped building. The interviews I held with a group of workers from the ministry helped me understand the way they work and diversity of work environments that accommodates different tasks they have to do during the day. Even though flexible work environment is promoted as a work place of the future, still in certain situations people need to feel like they belong somewhere: project team, department – and feel a better connection with the people around them.

As part of our studio we have also researched on and visited some precedents. Looking at examples of previously realised projects shows the possible solutions for the same architectural typology. With two other group mates I have analysed two office buildings: Ford Foundation in New York and The Economist Tower (together with bank and residential buildings) in London. Even though both buildings are situated in rather densely built parts of the cities, they manage to create serene spaces enclosed by their structures which distinguish them from the surrounding urban structures. These spaces that are created might have a different character and architectural expression, but they both are aiming at the same thing: being open to the public and inviting them to come in and experience

the space around them. This proves that an office building does not have to be very private and disconnected from the people and the public space.



Figure 1 Ford Foundation atrium



Figure 2 The Economist Plaza

But it is one thing to look at buildings in the books, and another thing to see real projects. Visiting projects in Madrid (the study trip we went on with the group) showed me how materialisation can change and affect perception and character of somewhat similar projects.

Goals and relationship between research and design

In my Graduation Plan I stated the research question as following “Which architectural interventions can be used upon the existing building to emphasise a transparent character of the ministry and at the same time having to deal with issues of security and privacy?”

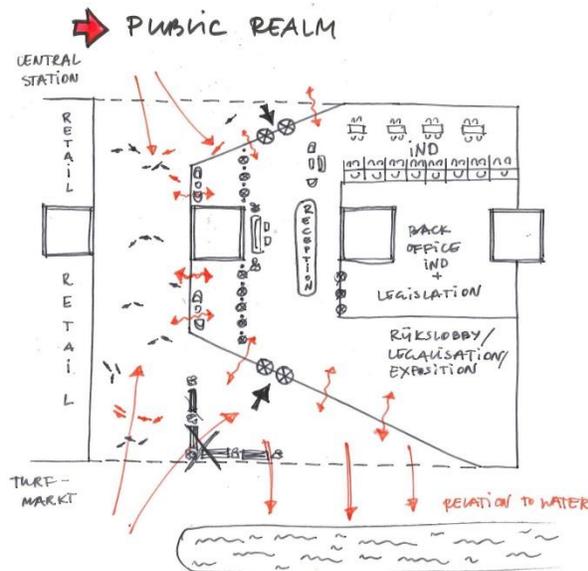


Figure 3 Concept for the public plinth

This question is primarily related to my treatment of the lower levels. From the interviews with civil servants it turned out that many of them like to take a break and walk away from their work place, especially during their lunch break. In this case they either go for a walk outside or visit some shops or cafes in the neighbourhood. When I was deciding on my intervention I have come to a conclusion that there are enough of outdoor spaces in a close proximity to our building, so my plan was not to design another one. Looking into the examples of Ford Foundation and The Economist building made me fascinated with the idea of an enclosed public space which, on one hand is part of the building, and on the other hand, is available for public

This also supports my idea of creating a transparent public plinth. I want to achieve this transparency not only by having an open and transparent façade, but I also with the help of the functions that are placed at the lower levels (The Hague information centre, reading hall, Governmental Helpdesk and conference facilities). As I am creating rather large spaces on the ground floor, which on their own create a feeling of importance, I want to use softer materials which would feel inviting to the public. As a

result I have created a large tribune that elevates from the ground floor and leads to the second floor. It is filled up with public functions under it and on top of it. It is a multifunctional space where different types of activities can take place: exhibitions, symposia, movie screenings, concerts, cultural festivals and evenings, receptions and book readings and so on. By inserting these functions and creating specific spaces I want to create a podium within the building where government can be connected with the public not only by the means of different informative events, but also physically by being encountering each other in the same place.

However, the task of the design studio is not only about interpreting the connection between the public and the civil servants, but it is also about establishing this building as a centre for international, governmental and interministerial events. In my building this centre is located on three levels, which serve as connecting levels within the building. Among others these levels house such important spaces like Van Kleffenzaal where important international conferences take place, which has its own vip lounge and lunch rooms connected to it. There is also a large number of meeting rooms of different capacities, multipurpose rooms and informal meeting spaces, which are used for meetings with the visitors as well as for large teams from the ministry. Restaurant, coffee corner and the lobby area are not only used for leisure, but also as a place to informally meet and discuss current events.

Creating the place of work which corresponds with the ideas for the new way of working is also important in this project. In order to improve the way finding and orientation in the building, I am proposing to create a horizontal axis which would run along one side of the cores and connecting all the office wings together allowing for a view to the either end of the building. The office levels are divided in three clusters: four levels are reserved for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, four – for the Ministry of infrastructure and environment, and the last three are taken by the top governmental officials and the crisis centres. Each ministry cluster has three working levels with informal and one combined level. A typical working level has formal working places in the wings of the building and informal working and meeting places in the spine. The combined level has project spaces in the wings in the north of the building and secretaries, IT and support and informal meeting and working in the south wings. The spine is occupied by the formal meeting rooms. All the office floors are connected together with the staircase, which spirals up and connects levels 7 through 14. In order to accommodate different working activities the office layout has become a mix of different types of working places: team rooms, closed, semi-open and open work places.

Design process

Even though my design goals have been set for a while, it still took me some time to interpret them in the right way and find the correct solution to them. The main reason for that is the size of the building.

When we visited the building, on one hand, I was rather excited because of its unusual shape and good location. From the outside the building looked big, however when walking inside, I could not tell where I was anymore, so, the dimensions and overall proportions were lost. Later on, when doing research and design proposals with my group mates, again and again I got confronted with the dimensions of the building. Though it was not that I didn't like the fact that I could create large spaces, it was more that I didn't have a feeling for this type of scale, which made me stumble many times. Instead of having a well-constructed design plan, I was jumping from one part of the building to another, still, failing to really understand the vastness of the spaces I was creating and my design products were not getting any more defined. During these times I would put many of my ideas into writing, and then I would go back to them when the time was right.

Usually, when I would get stuck with a project, I would gladly visit projects of a similar scale to understand the proportions of the space. But unfortunately I could not find the projects that could relate my mine in scale. So, I tried to think also from a functional point of view.

In order to fill the space with architecture and people, I introduced a number of public functions, which could help break down the space and at the same time serve as a connection between the ministries and the public. It took me a while to research which extra functions I would like to have in my building, because I wanted them to make sense and not be completely random.

I realise that during my design process I was often waiting to start filling the drawings with functional elements until my design made sense to me. This made the design process slow down a lot. But I do realise now that if I have started doing it on the earlier stages of design it would help me to better understand the qualities of the spaces I created.

What eventually helped me understand the scale of the project was making models (mostly computer 3D models). I would make a block of a certain size and then see how it looks in relation to the surrounding space. I realise that making fast and simple physical models was essential for understanding the space I was creating and I admit that I have not done that often enough.

Placing specific programs and functions in the building is not enough to create a certain atmosphere. Functional solutions have to go hand in hand with architectural decisions. Choice of materials also plays an important role in giving a space a certain character. I have noticed that during my design process I have often confused architectural alterations and interior materialisation. However it is not true for all spaces. There are spaces in my building which have not been altered much architecturally, but which do get a certain character due to the materials chosen.

The relationship between the project and a wider social context

Designing a building for the ministry is an interesting task. It seems that here in the Netherlands more and more information from and about the ministries is available online. On one hand it is rather useful, but on the other hand it leads to the fact that there is less direct personal contact between the public and civil servants. And this contradicts with the image of transparency that the government wants to establish. Especially it is not handy for elderly people who are not familiar with computers or for immigrants or expatriates who have a question but are unable to search for it online. This is why, in my opinion, it is important to still be able to organise this kind of interaction between the citizens and the state. This is the reason why I am introducing and Governmental Helpdesk into my building. This will be the place where people of all ages, nationalities and statuses could come and get assistance of different matters of municipal and governmental character.

Nowadays a public building has to be flexible and multifunctional. This is what I kept in mind when creating the public tribune and thinking about the functions for it. Eventually it became a place where expositions and public social gatherings take place. It houses an auditorium which can be used for movie screenings as well as for symposia and public lectures. It also houses a small book collection about The Hague and the ministries, which gives people an opportunity to learn about the city they live in or are visiting. The meeting facilities can be rented out by the third parties, but also used by civil servants to meet with public.

Conclusion

During this project I have had a lot of ups and downs and even now I am not sure about how satisfied I am with the final result. However, I have done my best to answer the questions I have had about the design during the course of 9 months. I noticed that most of my struggles came because of the size of

the building. However instead of breaking it down into smaller pieces, I tried to embrace its size and create larger spaces. By this I challenged myself, but also created problems for myself as I kept finding it hard to wrap my mind around the scale of the building. So, I think if I knew in advance that I would have to deal with such a large building, I would choose something that would not be so massive.