Reflection p5
UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

A.G. Gaydadjiev
1315153
Faculty of Architecture, TU Delft
28.5.2014

Studio: Strategic Architectural Design Development
Main Mentor: H. Van Bennekom
Building Tech mentor: B. Cremmen
Introduction

This report focuses itself on the theoretic and thematic framework of the design studio in regard to the assignment of the United Nations Environmental Council – at hand. This work should be seen as reflective towards the research and design process during my graduation phase.

Assignment

Best summarized, during the graduation studio the participants have moved from the urban scale all the way through to the detailing. The studio focuses on creating a proposal for the United Nations Environmental Council – which is the individual graduation assignment. Insofar, thematically the assignment intrinsically appends itself to the notion of the environmental, ecological and sustainable in juxtaposition to the architectural.

Anteriorly to the factual assignment of the UNEC (United Nations Environmental Council), a studio analysis has been conducted into the urban area of New York City, Manhattan – as collective studio effort. This analysis is bounded within the context of the individual assignment as the plot of the United Nations, and therefore the graduation project, is located in Manhattan. Some of this large scale urban analysis - and therefore its output - is applicable from the macro level to the micro level of the building – how this relation functions will be delineated further in the design paragraph.

Title

The United Nations Environmental Council, a workshop for sustainability.

Research Question

‘How can a building and an entity as the United Nations Environmental Council best be physically manifested to act/become an instigator for global sustainable conduct.’
A. Design for United Nations Environmental Council

The physical manifestation of the architectural quality of this proposal lies within the rigorous reductionism (or simplification) whereas abstract geometric volumes have been applied to house a highly complex program; here the geometric elements are not only of a graphical/compositional character but also of a more refined architectural one. These geometric elements, I refer to, are the slabs which are the main representation of the building. Like stated before these elements are not only a compositional thematic, but also a deeply architectural one.

These slabs, are the ancillary elements of the building; they house the elevators, stairs, sanitation, ventilation and corridors, basically they are what is needed in the architecture to support “space”. These geometric elements therefore orientate the space between on and other between the city and the waterscape, on an urban level. The reason for this orientation is of a poetic nature. The UNEC deals with environmental issues, which means the organization deals with the relation between man and nature – thus cityscape and waterscape. see figures below.
A. Design for United Nations Environmental Council (cont.)

Thus as previously described the slabs are ancillary architectural elements – for purposes of further understand these are pictured below.
B. Reflection of the Design for the UNEC within the framework and social context

Firstly the relevance of such a building or organization as the UNEC is clear; The United Nations is an intergovernmental organization established to promote international co-operation. Its objectives include maintaining international peace and security, promoting human rights, fostering social and economic and economic development, protecting the environment, and providing humanitarian aid in cases of famine, natural disaster and armed conflict.

At this moment in time, the United Nations is structured within 5 principal organs, outlined below. These organs have to possibility to establish “agencies”, which can aid these main organs in their functioning. Well known examples are the IMF, UNICEF and UNESCO. Now if we look at the organization through today’s idiom and understanding of the concept of sustainability, which we understand according to the 3P’s – People, Profit, Planet (Environment, Social and Economic), we can see the UN deals with People and Profit, but Planet does not have its own principal organ within the UN. The organization does however have an agency, the UNEP, United Nations Environmental Program, which deals with Environmentalism.

To stipulate and encourage widespread notion of the importance of Environmental issues a new organ could play an enormous role internationally. Also, since the establishment of the Brundtland commission in 1983, the issue of dealing with sustainable development increased significantly in complexity. Therefore Anno 2013, the United Nations environmental program is in need of its own representative council building that can act as a global recognizable icon in promoting environmental politics.
B. Reflection of the Design for the UNEC within the framework and social context (cont.)

Secondly, the assignment can be viewed within its own relevance of architecture against the backdrop of our understanding of such a building socially and culturally. Therefore the assignment becomes somewhat contradictory. I will try to delineate this further here. This discussion also relates back to my research question.

The main thematic is sustainability and environmentalism – brought to the foreground by research, analysis and discussion. The studio allows for understanding existing parallels in relation to architecture, as sustainability is to be seen as an addition to architecture. Therefore, the question which has to be asked is; what is the relation between the specific architecture of the UNEC in juxtaposition to the topic of sustainability. This is the crossroad at which my design is to be positioned, as this seems to be the most important theoretical question regarding the individual assignment of the Environmental Council – and therefore it has its origins within my research question. While one might think the absolute and extreme pursuit of an utmost sustainable and environmental architecture is the main goal for the United Nations Environmental Council, I would like to disagree. Sustainability and ecological design is important, but secondary to the assignment – it is definitely important, but it should not shape the basic premise of the design. As environmentalism will, and can, be fitted as secondary to architecture. How and why I would like take this position I will break down in the following.

At this point I would like to introduce and describe methods used in the design/thought process. As the site and program are given, by the studio, it seemed relevant and important to reflect on what such an Environmental Council would mean in itself and internationally, as an architectural object. Such conduct can be classified as retro- and introspective into the assignment, which I have conducted alongside the usual studio brief and tasks. By the means of reading, thinking and writing on the topic of the United Nations and environmentalism I have tried to shape a theoretical basis for the architectural assignment. In a way this represents the backing of my thesis and a portion of my research – albeit individually. This as will be made clear further on, has shaped my concept through various means.

The goal is creating a domain, sphere and space in which our natural-cultural relationship is investigated, inventoried and discussed on a global level – an Environmental Council. Therefore, The UNEC should be seen as a space and sphere which facilitates transitional thinking – our conduct in relation to our environment. Moreover, the architecture represents and facilitates a workshop into our environmental relation and its progression into our near future – which has resulted in the title of the work.

Whilst trying to take a position on the UNEC as architectural object, a dilemma can be pinpointed. The dilemma of transience and longevity, which as I will outline further is problematic for such an institution. Sustainable and environmental research is transient, at a certain point in time certain techno-architectural features and aspects are regarded as most desirable; while as time passes by they move into a state of atrophy. As with most ongoing research and active scientific areas developments are in a continuously advancing state.
B. Reflection of the Design for the UNEC within the framework and social context (cont.)

For the UNEC this imminently means by the solidification of the architecture, the organization would represent only a snapshot, or frame, of our time while in all actuality it should represent our voyage to the future. “Environmental architecture, in other words, is environmental architectures, a plurality of approaches with some emphasizing performance over appearance, and some appearance over performance.” (Hagan, 2001, p.4)

If certain kind of environmental sustainability would be utilized for the UNEC it would immediately move into the vacuum of outdated and historic – which we want to avoid in the quotation from the work of Hagan. Constructing with solely the goal and conception of being symbolic through the means of environmental sustainability will be counterproductive in this specific assignment.

The wish to create a center, an agora and focal point should be achieved by deploying different means of sustainability, through the basic elements of architecture – as symbolic domain for transient thinking in environmental issues. Therefore the design should not emerge solely from environmental considerations, but from deeper (socio-) architectural means. Inspired by Corbusier, one of the founders of the original ensemble, I tried pursuing his pure architectural motives. As Corbusier (1924) describes in his book “Toward an Architecture” the three reminders of architecture are Plan, Volume and Surface. These are the indirect means by which I have tried to assemble my architectural proposal for the UNEC – in coherence with what such a building and therefore organization should represent. “Whilst for any nonpublic organization a new physical entity – an sich – would be enough, the United Nations is an global operating organ with a transparent character. Therefore – let’s define that for now – public involvement is not only an interesting, but also quite powerful tool. Rather than creating an authoritarian force – an invisible apparatus of private unity – the strive should be to allow for a contemplative and introspective character within the architecture itself and the architecture of the organization – architecture as space volume and socio architecturally.”

This is important, as environmental sustainability has to be understood as achievable via collaboration – only as a society acting as singularity do we have the power to change our existing detrimental ways.” From my manifesto, which is also appended.
The previous has been coupled to the architectural means of the plan. By inserting the public domain centrally in the building — and therefor the program — and creating focal points an engagement between the UNEC and the public is created.

Secondly, whilst analyzing the given program — researching and (de)constructing — an important architecture element of the organization is discovered, the council hall - other further analysis of the program will be omitted, as such is of hierarchical less significance. This council hall represents the idea and power for which the UNEC stands — global discussion, exchange and propagation of environmental doctrines.

“The council hall, which is one of the most important elements of the UNEC — as is the assembly hall to the whole of the United Nations — will be taken as the representative architectonic object in the language of the building. The council hall will be outward symbol of the gathering, processing and propagation of issues regarding the environment”. Excerpt from the manifesto written in parallels to the studio.

The council has been shaped by means volume — functionality, i.e. creating space which is appropriate for gatherings on the issue of the environment. Important practical and functional decisions have been attributed to the arrangement of chairs and gathering typologies. This 'functional' has been mixed with an eclectic element in my further design stage by interiorly signifying this connection between the council and earth — i.e. skylight and heaven.
C. Design process and Methodology

The design process has been touched upon in the previous paragraph, and therefor will be briefly discussed here. As can be read the writing and rethinking has been a major induction in the design. Next to that the studio research, into the topic of sustainability and the 14 divided topics, has had some influence in the design process. The research has given me a wider scope and understanding of certain applications within the realm of architecture and especially in Manhattan. While some topics could not be directly implemented into the design process, some have been or have been modified. But at the end like I stated they are of secondary nature — it can be appended to the architecture and then be modified, controlled and redesigned if necessary. The process and methodology in my case placed immense focus on the idea and conceptualization of the slabs, as architectural elements. Research and many iterations have fine-tuned the design to what it is at my final proposal. The slabs give an incredible freedom in spatial division and explore a typology of wide and deep architectural compositions.
D. Appendix (Manifesto)

The placement of the UNEC building should respect the current architectural ensemble, preferably by means of space, rhythm and dynamics. In congregation to this, the architecture should strive not to alienate itself as an object, but rather seek an architectural dialogue. As so far this dialogue can be described, in some terms which can and will be implemented on different scales of the project – from urban to detail, to be extracted in each phase of the design.

The former philosophy stems from the organizational construction of the United Nations itself. The Environmental Council is a new division and therefore also a layering within an existing structure – at least towards the outside world, as the UN already is currently already heavily involved in environmental issues. A new building, and will, act as a physical statement of the UNEC – not to mention the direct necessity for a properly functioning and organized architecture. Whilst for any nonpublic organization a new physical entity – an sich – would be enough, the United Nations is an global operating organ with a transparent character. Therefore – let’s define that for now – public involvement is not only an interesting, but also quite powerful tool. Rather than creating an authoritarian force – an invisible apparatus of private unity – the strive should be to allow for a contemplative and introspective character within the architecture. This is important, as sustainability has to be understood as achievable via collaboration – as a society at large we have the power to change our existing detrimental ways, but only if we work together. By creating and allowing public, and therefore directly the world, to glimpse inside the Environmental Council an understanding can be cultivated for the importance of environmental issues - this not only by the fact of doing but also by the fact of seeing. Indirectly, there has always been public interest for visitations to the UN, this is a fact which is inherently accommodated. The experience should not be one of gimmick nature but of honesty and understanding. A visitation to the UNEC is one of exploration and contemplation. This exploration will architecturally be realized by allowing the visitor to wander through the organization – allowing for varying vistas and ocular points in various organs and functions. To achieve this, the public space will be organized internally in a central way, between the offices and delegation functions. The wandering in the public space has to be accompanied with a series of direct informational inflections – expositions spaces, points and/or areas. As currently the United Nations is lacking in their facilitation towards direct outward communication (the background of the UN), this is something to be considered indirectly within the design.

The council hall, which is one of the most important elements of the UNEC – as is the assembly hall to the whole of the United Nations –, will be taken as the representative architectonic object in the language of the building. The council hall will be outward symbol of the gathering, processing and propagation of issues regarding the environment. Paraphrased this can be explained as a act of semiotics and functionality in design – a honesty in program and architectural gesture. In extension to the notion of transparency towards the public this council will also be a exposition to the public in itself; via a vista, route or other manner allowing the visitor to experience currently pivotal issues.
If we move into more concrete and formal intentions, the existing public square – the general assembly – will be extended between both the new building and the existing general assembly entrance. Thus, creating a public plaza with an intentional allure towards monumentality – a representative physicality.

Furthermore, the UNEC represents the inquiry into a more sustainable world. This in coherence with the fact 70% of the world population will be living in cities by 2050 the location of New York symbolizes the conflict our post-modern society will face. How does one construct sustainable within large urban areas – which by themselves solicit an unsustainable character. This thematic will be picked on an architectural level, by orientating and accentuating both the city and the waterside – the clash between nature and artificiality and post-modern humanity. From the inside the building will allow visitors to orientate themselves to these two extremes, for which we need to find existential common grounds.

-Alexander Georgiev Gaydadjiev
4/9/2013 (#1)
Here we can note the planning as delivered at my p3. I haven’t been able to graduation in relation to my plan, this has several personal motives - which will not be elaborated here.