REFLECTION PAPER

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STUDIO

Name/Theme: The Architecture of the Interior: “The Place of Work”
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INTRODUCTION

The task within our graduation studio The Place of Work is to transform the former VROM building (image 1) in The Hague, designed by Jan Hoogstad, into a new Rijkskantoor: a flexible office building for the ministry departments of Foreign Affairs and Infrastructure and Environment, including the public immigration office. The Dutch Government aims to have a 30% decrease of office space until 2020 (compared to the 1st of January 2012). This is due to fewer employees; more flex working spaces and the merging of ministries in buildings. The office spaces that need to be created are not designed for one particular employee, but will be used by different users and institutions in the future.

RESEARCH AND DESIGN

The design task of creating a flexible office space asked for a critical analysis on historical precedents within the office typology and a user research. We started with an extensive historical analysis of the office typology, to get a good overview of different work ideologies and their office typologies during the years. What can we learn from the open office plans within Taylorism and Bürolandschaft? Why did the earlier open office landscapes turn into the cubicles of the 1960’s? Are more recent studies on the office landscape from offices such as RAAAF useful as solutions or should we see them as conceptual studies? All these questions emerged during this research and this way it was possible to create our own vision for a flexible office space. By combining this with the user research and a building analysis, it was possible to get a more complete overview of the pro’s and cons for flexible office spaces and how this could be distributed throughout the building.

The office became a very important building in the 20th century. The Taylorism concept introduced by Fred Taylor in the beginning of the century advocated an open plan office typology in which the employee was seen more as a production factor than as a human being. By removing walls and placing the tables in systematic rows within the open office space, more employees could be placed within the space and a better overview on the workers could be achieved by the managing staff. Bürolandschaft was introduced in the 1950’s by the Quickborner team in Germany and tried to reach efficiency by introducing a typology that was based on a very extensive research on ‘human relations’. This resulted in an open office lay-out with the furniture seemingly scattered all over the place, including trees and some space defining elements to create some privacy as well. The cubicle was introduced as a reaction to all these open plan offices. The noise and lack of privacy were main reasons for the change from open office plan to the isolated cubicle, initiated by the

1 https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/rijksoverheid/inhoud/bedrijfsvoering-van-het-
2 http://www.carusostjohn.com/media/artscouncil/history/taylorist/index.html
3 http://www.carusostjohn.com/media/artscouncil/history/burolandschaft/index.html
Herman Miller Action Furniture. By keeping these precedents in mind I have been attempting to create an office environment where flexibility does not cause a lack of privacy or too much noise. A combination of different types of office spaces seemed to be a valid solution. In my design there are concentration rooms, project rooms and flex working spaces within the general office space.

The building analysis of the former VROM building made it clear that one of the main problems in the existing building is the way finding. It is very difficult to locate yourself in the existing building, since every floor looks very similar. By inserting a sequence of “special floors” in the atriums it will be possible to differ the different floors from each other and visual connections and in some cases physical connections in and around these floors make it possible to get a better understanding of the building. These special floors also created the opportunity to create bigger and more flexible spaces than the spaces within the existing rigid comb-structure. By giving them a more public function (lobby, restaurants, conference floor, ministerial anchor points and multi-purpose rooms) these rooms become the main features of the building.

User research on the personalization of the workspace showed that some employees (especially those who work already for many years in the ministry) find it very important to be able to personalize the workspace. Younger employees seem to be more used to flex workspaces, where personalization is almost limited to none. The program of the new Rijksskantoor asks for flexible workspaces and thus makes it very difficult for an employee to personalize. The wish from the ministry departments is to be able to showcase projects they work on and in that way create some kind of personalization of a department within this flexible workspace. To allow this within the non-personalized flex spaces, I included two (requested) department anchor points in the plan that allow a more personalized showcasing of projects and work. These two spaces can be seen as more informal, personalized (big) living rooms that are less generic and give the employee the feeling of belonging to a department within the ministry and also to be valued for the work he does by exhibiting it.

The hierarchy that is found within the Ministry of Foreign affairs is something difficult to completely abandon, since there are also security reasons for certain more private or closed of areas. For these security reasons I created some parts of the building that can be closed of when needed (the international conference centre, the minister department and the crisis centre). The minister department makes it possible to have certain guests or employees in a more secluded area of the building. By creating a circulation in the building that can be split in three parts: public, visitors and employees, the security zones are taken into account, without having numerous checkpoints or a complex lay-out of the building. The public can visit the public lobby and the public restaurant on the first floor above. The visitors can go up until the original fifth floor, which is now made double height to accommodate the meeting rooms (see Image 2). When an International Conference is held, there is a special floor with entrance to the Van Kleffenzaal (the big conference room). This floor has a visual connection with the fifth floor, but is separated for security reasons (when for example a VIP meeting is held). From the fifth floor up the circulation goes through the cores and is just for employees.

The research on introducing the public in a governmental building was done through a questionnaire with people that were in the public space of the City Hall in The Hague. I chose this space, since the City Hall has a similar governmental function and the location is almost next to our building. The public space here is used for events, but is also the entrance of the employees, so a place where employees and the public encounter each other. I found this a very positive aspect and wanted to enhance this even more in my design. For this reason I created a big public lobby, which also serves as an entrance for visitors and employees. By creating visual connections between the public and the employees I aim for an enhancement of the transparency of the ministry and interaction between the public and employees.
By introducing the public into the building and giving it a very important place, the idea is to enhance the social interaction between the employees (the civil servants) and the public (or society). The location of the project is on a very central place in The Hague (next to the central station and in between all the other ministries), which made it very important for me to actually create an indoor public space here, where events could take place, but that also is appealing on a regular day. I found it very important that the civil servants are connected to the actual public, since they do take certain important decisions for them. By having them entering and leaving their job through this public lobby, there will always be an encounter with the public (even if it is just visual) and thus a reflection on their work and the society they work for.

REFLECTION

The main issue I encountered with the design of this building was the scale of it. I started designing with models, which I used extensively to define the public lobby. But especially with the higher segments of the building (the conference floor and office floors) the scale became a problem while making models. Here I decided to work in drawings and with a digital 3D model to make design decisions. Mood boards and collages made me help define the materialization of the spaces. It would have been better for my workflow when I would have started with the digital 3D model in an earlier stage. At first I thought it was not necessary for the first design stage, since I wanted to work with physical models, but later it could have been helpful when I would have already started it then, since it became a lot of work to quickly start the digital model, while working on many design issues within the building.

![image 1: The existing VROM building.](image1.jpg)
Image 2: The circulation in the redesign, with a specific circulation for the public, the visitors and the employees due to security reasons and to enhance the interaction between the different users.

Image 3: The transformation of the building.