

Reflection Jeroen Ubels – Continuing Rome

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The project

Continuing Rome is a project that proposes to continue the tradition of re-use within in Rome through a radical gesture. This tradition of re-use in Rome has unfortunately almost died out, since all of Rome's city centre has become a sort of museum.

By bringing two parts together; churches that are being adopted out of the city centre of Rome and a vacant location with a long history of logistics, new qualities are created within the project.

The site is the site of the Gazometro, which resides just south of the city walls of ancient Rome. The plot used to be a large gas factory for Rome, which can still be seen by the Gazometro structure. It is squeezed in between the Tiber river and one of the old Roman roads going south, Via Ostiense. It's location close to the city centre and connection with many logistical flows makes for an unique chance to do a large scale project in Rome that has the power to sub verse the perception of the city.

This logistical history and character will form the fertile ground for the re-building and re-use of 10 selected churches out of the city centre. My position is that the many churches that Rome counts will slowly become a vacancy within the city fabric. Because they are so wide-spread but also hold a tremendous amount of quality art and architecture, they determine a lot of the public life within the city. But while current daily life detaches from these churches, they remain behind more museum piece than part of the social fabric of the city. Because they hold such highly monumental qualities, just destroying them would be wrong. However, the city could use some room to breathe, to try out new architectures and actually start layering the examples of re-use again. In this way making sure that the city doesn't end up as a full museum piece, no longer truly socially relevant.

By moving these churches to the area with the logistical character they are re-contextualized and reframed. In this way not only the quality of the objects itself is brought forward into new light but in combination with the logistics they can house a complete new function.

This function will still be in close relationship with the religious nature of the churches, however it does acknowledge the long arm of the church in a different way. Together these 10 churches are going to form one large second hand market for religious items.

Just like is done with the churches, the method of selecting, collecting and sorting the religious items will already give new meaning to the full collection. Per definition after collection, the separate items become more meaningful in relationship to each other. Besides that the fact that all the items will be collected in one location also gives a more clear point for re-used and re-valuation.

The architecture of the project is done in such a way that the estrangement of the churches will forever be apparent in through the new urban composition. The size of the project allows it to become a landmark of a time that appropriates the current architectural power in Rome and makes it their own, introducing Rome to a new era.

Research and Design

The interesting thing in this project was that the organization of the site was actually the first given of the final design. Already in a very early stadium this organization pops up in drawings and models. It took however a long time to frame it in the right way and to actually be able to extend this

organization into an actual project. This is mostly because out of the research certain elements were outputted, but actually no pointers for use were given. The research produced just a heap of residue that had to be dealt with.

The research focused itself around the architectural quality of Rome. A fascination in specific was the relationship between a very famous map of Rome, the Nolli map made in 1748, and the actual experience of the city. The material quality of the Roman architecture corresponds effortlessly with the image quality of the Nolli map.

Although this might be a nice feature to experience when you are there, the fact is actually that the whole city centre is sort of frozen at the moment. Almost no new experiments are done and the fabric of the city is frozen in a monumental state, turning Rome into a museum.

The research showed that Rome actually had a long history of appropriation of habits of former powers and of layering re-use upon re-use within the city. This phenomenon became the basis for the strategy of my project. I recognized a growing vacancy in the city fabric in the form of churches, struggling with the decay of Christianity, even in Rome. These churches actually come out of a long line of appropriation of methods from former civilizations and have themselves also evolved into often very spectacular structures.

It was for this reason that simply layering on the existing churches did not seem a too good idea. They were not in decay yet, but still in a high point of the architectural glory. But they could be the solution to the problem. By inputting them in a new area, new qualities would emerge and also the churches would be re-appreciated. So I decide to move 10 churches away.

This gave me the residue, in the form of the churches, that had to be dealt with on the location outside of the city. I can now conclude that dealing with an existing location and with ten dislocated buildings is a very difficult situation. There is need for a certain organization, but both the site and the buildings have already very distinct specifications. It has been a giant puzzle to create a blend that works. In hindsight it might have been too large of a step to put all of this context into the project. On the other hand it does feed the project with so many references that the simple intervention that the project is already triggers a lot of associations and makes for a carefully orchestrated and pleasing image that does place rightfully in its time and into the discussion.

Re_Claiming

The theme of the graduation lab was re_claiming Rome. This is actually done on 4 levels in this project.

First of all the re-claiming is done on an urban level. Not just one building, or one area, but the whole city centre is re-claimed through the acupuncture act of moving the churches away and freeing up space.

Secondly the re-claiming of the churches by society for a new experiment is also an important move. The churches are not residues or agents of a current power anymore, but they become elements that have been given back to society and are re-evaluated through the experiment that is this project.

Thirdly the role of the Gazometro area was re-claimed since the logistical nature of this site has been brought back into honour. While the whole area surrounding the Gazometro has a strong logistical history, none of them seem to use the benefits that are there for a huge logistic capacity.

And as a fourth, the religious items that will be re-distributed through this project. They are re-claimed to be re-used in a huge way that will also reframe these items much more as a resource than they could ever be on their own.

A final re-claim, that is not a full claim but more a re-activation, is the relationship of the project with the river. Letting the project land on both the river and the city. The banks of the river are re-integrated into public realm that continuous around the project and into the project. By doing so the re-appreciation for the quality the river can bring is brought in the collective memory once again.

These re-claims are also constantly made obvious through the design and the organization of the project. The layout of the plan also adds to the fact and the idea that the structures are claimed, because they are never fully returned to a state of rest. They remain attached to the main structure and the concept and are never returned to how they were intended to be.

In conclusion I think the project answers in all kind of ways to the theme of re_claiming.

Function follows form

The graduation lab does not necessarily have a very distinct approach, everybody is very free in their own ideas and methods. The methods that I have used for research were very straight forward. A specifically selected tool, the Nolli map, provided me with a lens to the city that was very resourceful.

The methods I used to allow the project to take shape were a bit more unconventional. In this case there was a lot of form, but not yet a function. This was an approach that I was not used to. It took me a lot of time to match theme, function and form. While in the end these three form a very strong bond, this bond had to be really sought after time after time. Mostly because the form had so many associations with different functions that were for me never an option because of their obviousness and being too much of an end function.

The idea that this project was never meant to be an end for ideas concerning architecture but more than anything else a vessel for new ideas made it difficult to align everything.

I might say now that the function follows form is a method that does encourage you to really dive into the material at hand. It forces you to get up close and personal with existing architecture and therefor really makes you take a stand in the continuous discourse of architecture. Of course doing so in Rome adds to the whole experience.

The size of the project was another issue to tackle. Function follows form might be doable but function follows ten churches and a whole industrial site is a step that is quite a frightening one. Of course when you are starting to move churches, you actually create a lot of space in Rome, but the larger the object you move, the bigger the question is where it lands.

Project and the wider social context

The whole project has emerged from a position that deals with the connection between architecture and society. The project aims through the image it provides to provoke thoughts about your own relationship to the buildings around us and to see them as an area where you are actually able to act upon. At the same time it provides spots where it is able for society to re-connect with the built matter.

The second theme that holds a connection to the wider social context is the one of re-use. Second hand items, and repurposed churches are showing us that dealing with the existing can be a fruitful way to look forward.

As last and third theme the typological development throughout the architectural discourse leaks out of almost every drawing in this project. Re-using such highly typological elements as catholic churches is a step in this debate in itself.

Conclusion

In the end the project has fed me with a lot of inspiration, references and associations. This was also the very difficult side of it. To find the right road between all of these options and to be very specific in my choices forced me through a difficult trajectory. The fun thing is that it does seem that my instinct is often in the right place. Production to make it explicit is however a more difficult thing. A project of this size needs a certain focus, but when this focus is such a large organization, questions pop up anywhere. The trick in the end was to be detailed about everything and then go back into merging it all into a project that seamlessly connects all these elements. In the end the project did become the captivating interesting somewhat weird result of my own specific focusses and choices to create a project that is truly a one of a kind.