

Msc4 Palace
Interiors Buildings Cities

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City Halls

The theme of the graduation project in the studio of *Interiors Buildings Cities* is *Palace*, the administrative centre of Brussels. It is important to mention the fact that the majority of the citizens of Brussels are foreign-born or of foreign descent. This makes this city, the second most diverse city in the world. This heterogeneity of the city was a starting point of my research. The diversity can be witnessed on the different levels such as culture, class, income, migrations, characters of different districts. All this defines the character of the city but also can be a reason for the tension between identities and authorities. The aim of the graduation studio was to design an administrative centre of Brussels, one of the 19 municipalities forming the *Brussel Hoofdstedelijk Gewest*, an answer for the existing proposal of the building - *BruCity*. A place which represents all the citizens, which is open for a dialogue.

To design such a building, it was important to understand the context of the place where it should be situated and its problems. As a group, we investigated the city of Brussels dividing it into the themes such as history, culture, politics, public space, infrastructure etc. The result of this research was a book, where we elaborated on these issues, researching them with the help of literature, drawings, maps and any kind of source of information. During this research, we referred to the architectural and social problems of the city. The knowledge we have collected helped me to understand the social and political structure of the city, its history, but also place the future project in the more specific ground.

The aim of the design of the administrative centre, a City Hall of Brussels, was to create political space. But what makes the space political? What is the behaviour which impacts the political changes and what kind of architecture can encourage political behaviour? I tried to find the answer to these questions through several studies. One of the studies was to research activists groups and relate their activities to the politics of the city by analyzing specific events that have taken place in the past in Brussels. The events were first analyzed and then represented in the form of a drawing based on a 3D model of the event. A significant part of the study of the political space was carried out by means of an analysis of all types and typologies of political places located in Europe. The studied precedents served as a reference of architectural settings for political action historically, spaces of

gathering, representation. Research of the mentioned examples helped me to understand the cultural and historical conditions along with the background these precedents developed from. That could be compared to the existing conditions related to the project in Brussels. The booklet with all the examples served as a reference book for the design problems. Moreover, as a part of the study of the political action, we took a part in the World Climate Strike in The Hague. The strike created awareness of the importance of dialogue. The large group of people gathered there to show and share the disagreement but the route of the strike did not cross the political institutions, either the residential areas.

Furthermore, as a part of the study, we designed a political space led by our own fascination. By analyzing the events that have taken place in Brussels we could imagine the nature of the political actions in the city, its physical aspects and problems standing behind each of them. Most of these events took place on the street. For me, the nature of the street as a political space was the start of my private research, my own fascination, leading to the P1 design and the final design proposal.

P1 presentation was a result of the political space led by our own fascination - in my case the street as a political space. I investigated one of the main streets of Warsaw - Marszałkowska street, a tool of propaganda, huge artery uncompromisingly cut through the fabric of the city. In the democratic cities, public space often encourages people to create interaction and it becomes a background for social life. For over 40 years, the public space of Warsaw became a place of political propaganda, an arena to communicate the power and ideals of the government. The model represented scaled and deformed pieces of the facades of Marszałkowska Street and Konstytucji square. The symmetry and the monumentality of the facades were intentionally broken. When we observed the space from the distance, the facades shaped the symmetrical, endless and monumental image of the street, but when we started to approach these facades, the composition was starting to fall apart. The symmetry no longer existed, the building seemed to be getting smaller and deformed.

The conclusion of the P1 exercise led to the definition of the street as a 'modern urban theatre'. The street allows people to express their disagreement, push the authorities collectively to undertake change, make social interactions and build new connections between individuals and groups. The street becomes the ultimate arena to communicate discontent, a vehicle and theatre of protest, a space of flow and movement, where people not only express their anger, but also where they create identities, enlarge solidarities, and extend their protest beyond their actual circles to include the unknown, the strangers.

The starting point of the idea of the project was the complexity and the heterogeneity of the city of Brussels demonstrated on its streets and the communal life but also resulted from the analysis on the city carried out during the first semester. We have learned how every change in the city, especially those related to the infrastructure and public space, influences the urban fabric in the future. By analyzing the architecture of Brussels, we have concluded that representative buildings such as the federal parliament have a large public space (which in fact is fenced) in front to face the large facade and intimidate the citizen. Comparing the facades of the political parties or the activism organizations we could conclude that often the activism space was closed disproportionately to the level of participation. That could be a result of the security measures brought on by political tensions. The infrastructure of such a heterogeneous and multi-layered city becomes not only a physical form to hold the inner relationship of the city structure, but also contributes to the relationships of people who live inside this city. The new project should meet all these problems and provide a solution.

The main objective of the project was to create a building which contributes to the public realm of Brussels. It was important to me, to extend the existing public space instead of creating a new one, to connect the new building with an existing dynamic of the surroundings, to use it as a part of the design. Moreover, I wanted to create a place of dialogue, a place where citizens and authorities can meet and stand as equals.

Designing a political - democratic - space, reflecting the political actions happening nowadays and in the recent years, and considering my own background (I am from the country where human rights are constantly challenged) was not an easy task. A lot of examples of the political buildings are manifests of power of the authority, rather than a place open for a dialogue with citizens, a place where citizens feel equal with the authorities, a place where they can not only come to solve their political dilemmas but also meet.

The building is located on the half of the given plot. The other half is the square which connects with the fabric of the city but also gives the opportunity for the spontaneous gathering of the citizens. The general composition of the building is based on the vertical zoning (from public space, through public corridors to private office spaces). The function requirements were based on the *BruCity* brief, this brief was a starting point. The ground floor is open to the public and contains an entrance hall with the accompanying functions such as restaurant, print shop, cafe, main hall, void with the visual connection to the council room, located in the basement, with gathering space and spaces for activists to organize workshops that can be extended to the street. The presence of the square is significant not only in terms of protests and manifestation but it can be an extension of the functions located on the ground floor. The composition allows to cross the building, connects the space divided by the long volume. The political functions such as council chamber and several council rooms are located on the underground level,

connected with the ground floor by the main staircase placed in the main hall. The rest of the floors contain mainly an administrative and office functions exposed to the visitors and connected by the circulation placed on the east-south facade.

The east-south facade is a crucial point of the idea. An internal street, a circulation and recreation space, a winter garden, an extension of the offices and recreation space. The facade allows the vertical connections within the building, but also becomes a space exposed to the surrounding street, can be open to the adjacent square, but also form the extension to the office space, a winter garden. This space is characterized as a 'public' place when the individuals can connect with the individuals but also with the people working in the administrative centre, a space of dialogue and interaction. The space connecting all the floors, but also the face of the building towards the square. The nature of this space stays in the close connection and dialogue with the nature of the public space. It is exposed to the adjacent square.

Climate change is the matters that concern the architects since the building industry is a big part of the problem. The design of the project and its construction can minimize the harmful impact on the climate. The construction of the building is made of three major materials adjusted to its role and function. The concrete part of the construction is designed to preserve a long time and serve the role for the other building when the reconstruction is needed. The rhythmical distribution of same spaces favours the variety of future designs. The east-south facade strongly contributes to the climate of the building. It is a lightweight steel structure constructed to minimize the material usage and create an open and slim image. It is an 'extended' double-skin facade with openable windows. It was important to create a durable and flexible structure but also fully adjusted to its function and image.

The project opens a dialogue about the relation between the citizens and the authorities. It challenges the meaning of democracy, authority, hierarchy. It questions the nature of the office space, working space, and the character of the political institutions. It is important to create a space where citizens are equal, giving an opportunity to disagree, a place where people can come together.

During the process, we were exposed to the new situation caused by the worldwide pandemic. This situation led to the country lockdowns. We were no longer able to work at the university and the plan prepared for the second semester, including working with maquettes, was no longer possible. The new reality we all needed to adjust very fast was very unstable and unpredictable. The digital way of work and communicating absolutely affected the design process. The quality of communication declined. The new organization challenged the structure of the course. This reality raises many questions about the future, the usage of existing architecture with the new social rules, the nature of protesting and tests the flexibility of our design and its core ideas.