

Reflection Iris van der Wal

One year ago I decided to graduate at the Explore Lab studio, the graduation studio without a fixed thematic framework or a methodical line of approach. Within this studio I had the possibility to work on a project of choice and to select my own design, research and building technology tutors.

The theme

The theme on which I was selected to join Explore Lab is *contested heritage*, and more specific Roman heritage of the fascist period. The direct cause was the decision of the Italian fashion brand Fendi to move their headquarters and fur ateliers to the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana in Rome, a building built to host the museum of Italian civilisation during the 1942 World Expo (which was never held). My project is a redesign for this building, showing an alternative approach.

During the process, multiple (sub)themes gained importance. On one hand, the bigger picture of heritage in general was necessary to understand contested heritage. This turned out while researching the value assessments as described by for example Halbertsma and Kuipers, and Riegl. It made me realize that most of the contested heritage was conserved because of other reasons than its conflict value. And that therefore those buildings should not be reduced to only contested heritage, but should rather be seen as heritage with a contested past.

The question arose how this contested past is visible in architecture and how it can be perceived by visitors. In the beginning I was surprised to find out that Fendi wanted to link itself with this building, because for me it was closely linked to Italy's fascist past. But researching what buildings can mean and how they can transmit ideas or intentions, the realisation came that this building was not literally showing a link fascism. There are no symbols, only references on a more abstract level. For the representation of history and memory in architecture or the contextualisation of it, secondary sources are needed.

The methodical line of approach

The Explore Lab studio has a larger focus on research than the other graduation studios, that could be regarded as an approach for the design. Still the methodology is the student's to decide. The absence of a specific method was important to me, to be able to approach the project in a non-dogmatic way. As a part of the research, which is mainly based on literature survey, I interpreted the various opinions on how architecture could transmit a meaning through making a 3D object (a relief inspired by Jan Schoonhoven from the ZERO movement), collages and a short movie. This associative approach brought me a better understanding of the discussion and at the same time, using the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana as a subject, it made me familiar with working with the building. And it helped me to think more freely about how to deal with memory and contested history in designs. Case studies formed a part of the research as well, but were difficult to select. The struggle with the selecting criteria took more time than expected and resulted in less time for the actual studies. It could have been useful to spend more time on these case studies, because they could have played a more important role to make the step from the research to a design.

For the design itself various methods were used, but the most important one is modelling; both physically in models as virtually in the computer. The original design of the building is easily representable in 2D drawings, but the interventions are mainly in the connections between volumes on different levels in the building and made it necessary to work in three dimensions. In order to grasp the scale of the building, I started to work with physical models. After a while I decided to parallelly work on 3D models in Rhino and Revit, because these were faster to make and easier to document.

The relationship between research and design

A part of the research has a direct link with the design, namely the analysis of the site, and the study to its historical context and the image that is created in movies, pictures by Fendi and other secondary sources. Already in the beginning all students were warned, by both teachers and former explore lab graduates that the results of the research can be difficult to translate into guidelines for the design, or design elements. This was the case for me as well. For me the research was crucial to identify an the attitude towards contested heritage. The relationship lays not so much in specific design elements derived from the research, but in the position that I could only take because of the understanding of the site and its history and how I regard contested heritage.

The relationship between the project and the wider social context

My role as the outsider, the Dutch architecture student, that makes a design for such a charged building, was sometimes difficult. In Italy people are in general positive about the re-use of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, while foreign journalists are negative or at least really critical about Fendi's move. From the beginning onwards I was aware of this position, and I tried to approach the assignment as open as possible.

Studying various cases of contested heritage, I came to see that the way that Fendi is dealing with the building itself, as it appears in their photoshoots, catwalks, shopping windows and shops is efficient. In this way the image of the iconic building is used to sell another message, that of 'timeless fashion'. Still I do not agree with the way they are trying to get rid of the building's history, but I see how clever they are doing it and how this method could be use in another way. It also made me realize what the value is of architecturally intervening in contested heritage versus intervening in the non-physical context, by changing the perception of the building by showing it in other contexts. Because of the physical aspect, people cannot deny a building. They are confronted with it when they pass it by. Visiting a building gives a full multi-sensory experience, while pictures can only give a visual one. Even though buildings cannot transfer literal ideas, they are able to give meaning in a metaphorical way, to a large audience.

By intervening in the building in a visible way, it already largely influences the debate about (contested) heritage. Visitors can be more aware of the difference in time between the original building and the intervention, realizing that we are also living in another time than Mussolini. It could be a starting point for people to explore the Italian history more deeply and to discuss it.

Another theme that gained importance was the world of fashion and especially its production methods. Italian media warmly welcomed Fendi's new headquarters and fur atelier in the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, partly because in this way 'made in Italy' stayed in Italy. Most fashion brands outsource their production to third world countries, in which the working conditions are generally inhumane, as illustrated painfully in 2013 with the disaster in the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh. Keeping textile and garment factories in countries as Italy, makes it easier to control the working conditions, because of the European laws on both labour and environmental issues, such as the use of toxic colours.

Whereas Fendi is known for its 'Haute Fourrure', the use of fur, is the new fashion brand Iris focusing on woven fabrics. The brand is trying to be as transparent as possible, about the working circumstances, sustainability and about the building and its history. The whole production process is visible to visitors, and they can even participate in it themselves, by sending in patterns for the fabrics. The process is made open source. Next to that is the machinery also open to students and other interested people. This fits in the contemporary movement of fablabs and mass customization.