

Reflection Paper

MSc3-4 Interiors Buildings Cities

After the Party

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Introduction

This document is a reflection on the process of developing and completing my final thesis as a Master Architecture student at TU Delft. I have developed my thesis within the chair of Interiors Buildings Cities, in the “After the Party” studio.

The aim of this document will be to critically look back at the methods chosen and the reasoning behind the project and to evaluate the success (or not) of the decisions made throughout the process. The relationship between the initial research and the resulting design proposal will be examined, as well as the position of these within the themes and approaches of the chair and the studio. Finally a reflection will be made about the relevance of the research and the design proposal within a wider social context.

The Process

The graduation project started with the Chair's year theme, "The Festive City" and the city of Maastricht. The theme of "The Festive City" and the "After the Party" studio, aimed to raise questions about the permanent influence of ephemeral events on the daily life and the architecture of the city. Through the study of relevant literature and a series of assignments about the theme and the city, we were expected to develop our own approach and to create our own "brief" by choosing the site and program of our design proposal.

The theme of the Festive City was approached from both a sociological and an architectural point of view. For the sociological aspect of the theme I studied a number of articles about festivities, their origin, purpose, characteristics and definitive elements. I also did field research (participant observation) in different festivities and studied a specific location during a weekday, the weekend and a festivity and conducted interviews about how the location was perceived in these timeframes. For the architectural aspect of the theme, a number of assignments were suggested by the design tutors that included the study of references through reading texts, making drawings and architectural models.

The study of the city of Maastricht was undertaken using a number of methods and tools. Combinations of maps and perspective drawings were used to describe the experience of the city. Models and accurate drawings of the site locations were made to get better acquainted with the built fabric of Maastricht. Interviews were conducted with locals to understand the perception, challenges and opportunities of the city. Finally a historical study of specific locations through texts and archives and a demographic analysis (from relevant data) was done in order to get a better understanding of the facts and figures of the city.

The first part of the research was quite interesting and rather successful as it allowed me to research themes that have interested me for a while through a set of different lenses and to form a brief that would allow me to explore these themes further with my design proposal. By the end of this part of the research I therefore gained a better understanding of the theme of the Festive City and found my own interests within that theme which I grouped under the titles "Social Interactions", "Theatricality", and "Collective Memory and Identity". The study of the city was also successful in allowing me to find the right location to explore my interests. What was perhaps, less successful for me was the choice of program which was delayed until further in the research. This perhaps had to do with the specificities of the chosen site and the difficulties that arose when I tried to project the requirements of the themes I wanted to explore on it.

The design process was highly influenced by the initial part of the research as I found myself thinking and developing the project in a way similar to that used to study references etc. The design process included making hand-sketches and architectural models in different scales, ranging from the urban up to a detailed level. This process was fruitful as it allowed me to have a holistic understanding of the development of my design proposal. At different stages of the proposal's development, different kind of research questions emerged, that required different methods to be answered. These ranged from studying references and making diagrams, to reading texts and making site visits, observing and taking photographs. What I could have done better, perhaps, would be the exploration of the design from an eye level point of view (therefore more perspective drawings from earlier on in the project) and the exploration of materiality and composition in models (therefore not only card-abstract models). All in all however, the design process was quite pleasant and fruitful and at the last stages of the project I could understand that I had gained a lot from it.

Research & Design

On being given the theme of the “Festive City”, my first reaction was to question the very notion itself and to ask “What is the festive?”. After studying a number of festivals and looking into relevant literature (as mentioned earlier), the answer I came up with, was that the Festive was about people getting together, in a theatrical way, in order to create a common understanding of their world. This notion of the festive, allowed me to understand my research better and come up with three themes, that of “Social Interactions”, “Theatricality”, and “Collective Memory and Identity”. The first part of my research about the architectural manifestations of the festive was therefore structured by these three themes. Below I describe the ideas that emerged through this research:

Social Interactions: I studied this notion through my study of the Piazza degli Uffizi where I looked at how the distribution of programs around the public space allowed people to co-exist in those spaces for different reasons and to interact in different ways. I also studied how the gradual thresholds around that space allowed for different levels of participation (passive to active) in the public life of the city.

Theatricality: I explored this theme by looking at the spaces used for festivities in Maastricht and how these spaces allow for festivities to take place. I also looked at the paths used for processions and how they suggested movement, pause and arrival therefore dramatizing the urban space. Finally I looked at how the city can be staged by framing certain views.

Collective Memory Identity: I researched this idea by studying the architecture of the Roman Triumph. Here I looked how certain architectural elements and forms were used to signify certain events and how these forms were then used to remind those events to people in their daily life. I also looked at how buildings were created to accommodate different functions throughout time and managed to be part of both the everyday and the festive life of the city and therefore part of the collective memory of its inhabitants.

These ideas were directly translated into my design proposal. Below I explain how:

Social Interactions: My proposal consists of 3 public urban spaces (2 exterior and 1 interior). These spaces are surrounded by a variety of functions that activate the spaces and allow different people to be in the space for different reasons and to interact with each other. They also have gradual thresholds (created by trees or architectural elements like loggias) to allow for different levels of participation in the public life of the spaces.

Theatricality: I have used my findings about the dramatization of urban space and introduced a sequence of different urban spaces that suggest movement, pause and arrival (from street to a small urban space and through a passage to a larger square and then through an arcade-like entrance, to the hall). I also used the idea of framing to frame certain views both in the exterior and in the interior of the design proposal.

Collective Memory and Identity: I have used and re-interpreted certain architectural forms such as the triumphal arch, the gate, the tower and the Dutch House as a way of contextualizing the proposal but also signifying certain moments and events and referring to a wider European architectural culture. I have also strived to introduce a program that has an everyday life but that also supports and accommodates festive moments and specific events as a way for the building to become part of the collective life and memory of the people of Maastricht.

As can be seen, the research findings were highly valuable and were fully exploited in the design process. Even though it was quite challenging to integrate the themes, the site and the program initially, I believe that the whole process was fruitful and successful at the end as it resulted to a coherent proposal that used and explored further the initial research findings.

Relevance within a Wider Social Context

As I came to realize at the initial stages of the research, the theme of the “Festive City” is highly relevant nowadays.

In our societies, people are increasingly becoming more detached from the place and the people around them. This is a result of several phenomena of the contemporary world such as globalization (multicultural societies and people changing their place of residence often), digitalization (reduction of the need to be in the physical world to perform a number of activities and to socialize) and the privatization of public space (public space is not open to everybody or is only accessible when conditions are met). This has a negative impact on the well-being of people as it is widely accepted that having a sense of belonging and socializing with other people is crucial for maintaining mental health and feeling content. This detachment from place and people however can also have a negative impact in our current ways of social and political organization. This is because for democracy to work, a sense of “demos” should exist, which means that the people within a geographically defined location should identify with each other and to feel part of a larger whole. The detachment from place and people can therefore diminish this “sense of demos” and obstruct the various democratic processes from running smoothly.

These phenomena and this need of people to create a sense of belonging, socialize and maintain a democratic society, gave rise to the number of festivities taking place in the last few years. Festivities are now widely used as a way to create social coherence and promote a communal spirit. Indeed, as I concluded from my research, the origin and purpose of festivities is, in essence, to gather people together in order to create a common understanding of their society. The Festive as a theme is therefore quite relevant in the light of the current societal situation. It is also a quite useful lens through which to look at a city, since it raises several important questions about public life, community and belonging, experience of the city, memory, identity and so on. My project touches upon several of these questions.

The three themes of my research that then guided my design proposal are, in essence, an exploration of how architecture can respond to this growing separation of people from the place and the other people around them. By looking at the notion of “social interactions” I explored how people can be brought together in the same spaces for different reasons in order to interact (passively or actively) with each other in order start recognizing and identifying with each other. Through the theme of theatricality I looked at how the experience of the city can be enriched so that people can gain more pleasure from being-in-the-city and have more moments of awareness of the place they inhabit. Finally through the theme of collective memory and identity I looked directly at how architecture can contribute in creating collective memories and therefore collective identities by creating spaces that are used for different reasons throughout time and by using elements that refer to a wider cultural heritage with which people can identify.

It is my hope therefore that both my research and my design proposal are of value within a wider discussion about several societal aspects and their reflection on architecture. Through my proposal I am hoping to make my own contribution into what the architecture of the city could be and what it could offer in a contemporary society.