

Reflection

Msc Architecture - Technical University Delft
Title: House of Music and Assembly

Overall year theme: The Festive City
Chair of Interiors Buildings Cities.

When re-collecting and -assessing the way in which my graduation project has developed in respect to research and design over the course of the past month, it becomes apparent that my ambitions for the design have evolved from an initial attempt of serving with my proposed building merely as a complementing and acknowledging "piece of city" to what was found to be the most influential architectural aspect found on place - the Barbican complex.

Through further discussion, I realized that both the site as well as the my chosen, programmatic content allowed, if not even asked, for a more self-confident and independent building - as long as the unity of it would still carefully speak and react to it's direct and intermediate context.

And while the aspects of being a "good neighbor"¹ were treated with a lot of care, my design has found an expression, which follows my strive for an unagitated and confident, "*communicative architecture*".

This very term, as used by the former head of our chair, Tony Fretton, derives from William Mann's essay: "The architecture of the unconscious collective." Fretton's as well as other key figures' writings together with the active weekly discourse within the studio help me realizing that cities need rooms where people can socialize and express themselves without having to perform or consume — spaces that eventually would spark peoples' identification with and interaction within a place and by doing so, help to shape an environment in which a healthy, civil society² could express itself.

Before this background, one of my main starting points, from pretty early on, was the socio-cultural as well as political concern and the relating thereto acknowledgment about the responsibilities that would come with the designing of a public building of a scale of our project for the House of Music and Assembly.

I concluded that, while being realistic about the extent and nature of influence of the profession, I would like to claim space and challenge the existing design brief in order to provide this room to more public, accessible and inclusive functions.

¹... and hereby I am referring to a conscious dealing with the existing urban fabric and its larger-scale trajectories (such as a linking of my proposal to the newly developed, so called "Culture Mile" which runs North of our site between the new Cross-rail Stations Farringdon and Moorgate as well as connections to an already existing cultural axis which includes institutions such as the former festival of Britain alongside the Thames, Tate Modern, London Bridge and St. Pauls Cathedral. While realizing and responding to this key-lock position of our site another main concern was the opening up of the Barbican complex through a carefully adjusted building mass which allows people to shortcut through the heart of the modernist building complex and hereby making it more accessible and permeable on a multitude of topographical heights. All these concerns were tested in three dimensional physical model studies in 1-500 and later 1-200 scale - a method which appeared to be very fruitful for the design process.

² In my opinion, not only London but also many other large European cities are currently facing developments (a selling-off the city, often to foreign investors which heightens the risk of real estate speculation. This trend is often followed by a real, physical segregation in which "normal citizens" can not afford a living in their own city anymore. Furthermore, the city authorities have less and less influence on the built environment which leads to a architecture which seems to be mostly concerned with the showing off of its building skin in order to be as attractive as possible to potential investors. The cutting of social as well as cultural investments as seen throughout the last years regrettably depicts an antithetical situation to post-war Britain and endangers the well-working of a collectively and at least to a small degree egalitarian society due to a lack of equal opportunities amongst the wider public.

My graduation design therefore reacts critically to the real competition and its intrinsic requests³ and shall be read as a plea for a social engagement in culture, providing a less profit- but rather human-oriented architecture. Confronting myself and understanding more the current political, cultural and economical processes and interdependencies in Britain`s capital, my proposal for this design brief replaces the square meter, scheduled for commerce and retail architecture with a social housing block, a public arcade with a doctors` practice and a nursery as well a public debating club and a freely accessible music hub⁴. By doing so, the proposed building shifts from a mono-cultural concert hall building with selling-architecture, to a multi functional, intricate and multi-layered building complex which besides many others also includes a concert hall in it. My design can, in a more abstract reading, almost be understood as a miniature of the Barbican complex⁵.

What I want to explore within this design for a "House of Music and Assembly" is, in how far a (public) building can be beneficial for a civic collective and this sense become inclusive, accessible and adaptable. After continuous tests in drawings and a whole set of different physical scale models, considerations of the publicness of the interior have found their way, besides the overall, multicultural program of the complex, into the design of the concert hall`s foyer spaces, the 24 hours open weather lobby and arcade with its adaptable pockets (public living rooms), but also and very importantly the expression the building towards the city⁶.

To follow Fretton`s argumentative line, *"the emptiness of the city is reached where space itself becomes vivid, buildings, vehicles and objects collide with enormous frankness and no detail and the fiction of the city is revealed."*⁷

Over the course of the semester I have more and more become interested in and confident about the idea of social and functional *"collision within"* - and the notion of the *"reveal of and between"* the interior and the exterior.

In the first instance, my design reacts with the described, multi-cultural and -functional programme.

From a structural as well as organizational point of view, one can distinguish different architectural sections and elements within the entity of the plan which always follow a strongly inscribed logic - the latter deriving and overlapping with structural dependencies of the respective systems:

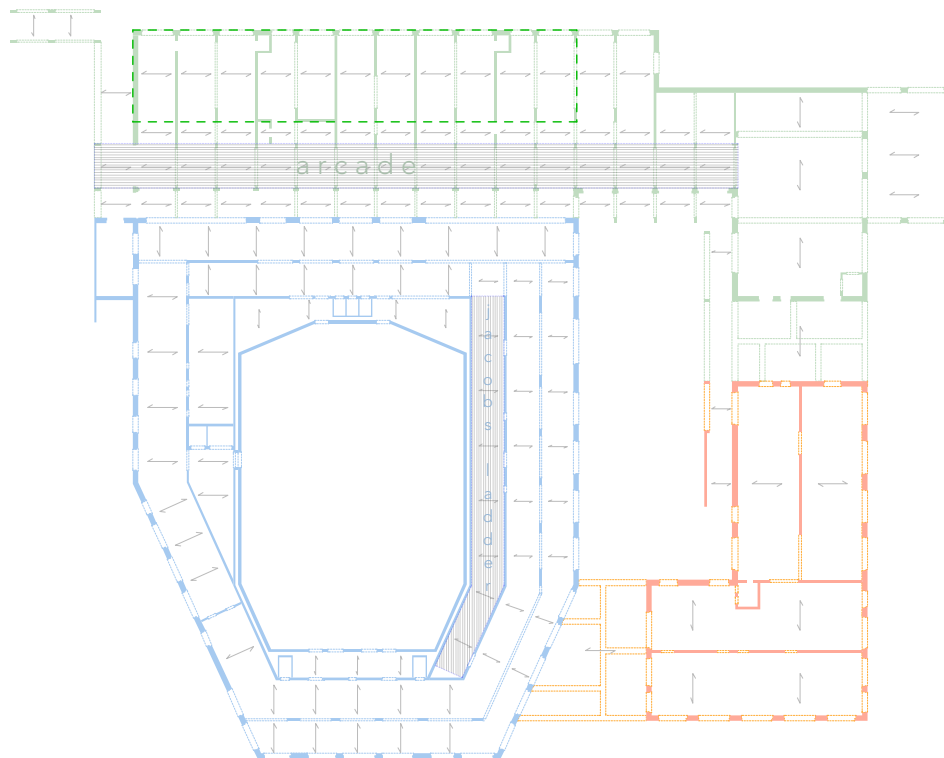
³ The committee of the real design, which we students with our studio echo for our graduation year, posted that the new building would have to be a investor`s magnet and therefore an architectural landmark, including thousands of square meters of commercial functions, retail and rentable office space. Generally this might sound realistic for a site-development of this kind - my frustration with it derives from the fact that the current site is property of the City of London and the authorities still do not take their responsibilities nor see the great chances of keeping such an estate in public hands in order to provide a *real public building*, not a commerce palace which reminds of a wolf in sheep clothes.

⁴ The idea for a debating club came from C.Grafes: *People's Palaces: Architecture, culture and democracy in two European post-war cultural centres* in which he refers to those clubs as typical phenomenon of the context of of the welfare state in post-war Britain - something which could in my opinion regain actuality before the background of the Brexit. A so called "Music Hub" is a institution which provides free music education to children and young adults, including free instruments and singing lessons. Since the LSO is "on site" already and those "Hubs" are often supported by professional musicians, I imagine the integration of this function to allow for a thankful synergy effect.

⁵ Besides the large scale, residential housing estates, the Barbican complex contains, or is adjacent to, the Barbican Arts Centre, the Museum of London, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, the Barbican public library and the City of London School for Girls and a YMCA. All this almost makes a self-reliant city within the city.

⁶ ... hereby referring to the physical, exterior appearance and facade expression of the building as described later on.

⁷ Fretton, T. (2014). *Tony Fretton Architects: Buildings and Their Territories*. Birkhäuser.



Scheme "A", showing the three different systems: The world of the concert hall in blue, the one of the school in salmon and the one of the public functions around the arcade in light green with the social housing on top. The dotted green line shows the footprint of the latter. The horizontal hatch signifies the arcade while the vertical one marks the central staircase.

The **concert hall** lives off the idea of the onion-like un-layering of wall plains which, while orbiting around the central concert hall, find each other or eventually unroll and evolve into the next layer, hereby becoming more and more fragmented: From the closed wall around the main hall I to a wall with opening, to a fragmented wall to the frame-like facade which wraps around the public foyer spaces. At other points the lines of these walls meet, run into each other and thicken up, as visible at western facade which features an increasing wall-likeness that ultimately gives a more domestic scale to the facade behind which the dressing rooms of the back of house are situated.

The **school** is located in the L shaped section of the building which makes the south-eastern corner of the complex. The stepping volume follows the principles inscribed by load bearing facades which span over the short sides of the building and are supported by two central bearing walls. Alongside the one, the main staircase wraps around it and serves this atrium-like circulation space which is naturally lit by a skylight. Behind the strong facade a set of good rooms invite for focused practicing and rehearsing. A special emphasis is put on the "joint" where the school and the concert hall system meet each other. While this moment marks the gate-like entrance situation to the courtyard⁸ which serves as a extension to the street, above this entrance gate there is a informal venue being situated at the intersection point between the world of the concert hall and the one of the school. The different sectional heights bleed into each other

⁸ Like typical, medieval English towns where instead of a big, formal square, the street simply widens locally to accommodate the market and other public assemblies, the courtyard in my design is neither space nor pure route but a combination of the two. As we learn in a lecture by Amy Thomas (PhD student at the chair of Interiors Buildings Cities) (the historic part of London up to this day features a great number of such small, informal courtyards which serve people to escape from the speed and noise of the city around them. I would like to understand the court in my design as an addition to the many exciting ones in the city.

through the stairs of the small auditorium and mark the encounter between public and more private moments of the design.

Both the arcade and the social housing which can be read as one larger system, originate organizationally from the structural logic of the layering of cross-walls which ultimately refers to the genius loci in the sense of a referring to the constructional characteristics of the neighboring housing block of the Barbican estate as located northwards from upper edge of our plot.

This rhythm is expressed not only in the seven stories of affordable, social housing⁹ but also in the layout of the public arcade which not only holds a variety of functions but also serves as a connector between the many different access points of the plot. It provides space for the highest possible, social clash of users - from dwellers which have their apartment above it, to parents with their children on the way to the nursery, to people, visiting the doctor but simultaneously concert-goers or musicians. With my design I seek to provide freedom for people to explore and appropriate the public interiors and everyday functions in order to enjoy themselves, individually or collectively. To refer to the overall theme of our graduation studio: "The festive city" — exactly these points of tangency as they can also be found in public infrastructures such as metro stations or places for everyone such as the famous British pubs is what I understand as the beautiful festive motive of every-day-life. Places which enable and sometimes maybe also stimulate/trigger to interact in a more collective and open-minded, public mind set.

As marked in scheme "A", there are main linear elements are introduced in the plan. The horizontal arcade which recalls an architectural typology which is deeply embedded in the British collective memory together with the main vertical element in the nature of a main circulation staircase, following the motive of the Jacob's ladder, serve as horizontal as well as vertical backbones the whole building.



Model image depicting an everyday-situation at the intersection point between the arcade and the the concert hall with its great variety of users.

⁹ Since the newly planned social housing block would become part of the service and maintenance of the Barbican Estate organization, I would like to assume that the currently high service fees for the new arrivals would be carried by the more prosperous dwellers of the existing Barbican estate in order to facilitate low rent for the social housing.

The multiple spaces differ in shape, scale and atmosphere: large and small, high and low, intimate, and open. Themes like pressure and release come into play — a diversity, designed to fulfill the wide variety of visitors and users of the complex.

All this is held together by a strong skin made of concrete - the material of the Barbican - with an exterior expression that reveals through partly generous openings the complexity and life of the interior functions and at the same time unifies the complex through its abstract quality and calm expression. Even though it differs at first sight quite remarkably from the appearance of the Barbican, it comes together through a similar level of abstraction in its exterior appearance which substantially speaks the language of a high physical permanence and durability of a unified structure.

The design of the faces of the building is sober and stylistically ambiguous in the sense that it can not directly be attributed to one specific style - hereby looking neither old nor new. All props of meditation between in- and outside are stripped away. The foyer spaces of the concert hall towards the streets and the courtyard are the layered extension of the two — places where one feels exposed or staged, in public, aware of the multifarious life of the city, of which the "House of Music and Assembly" is a part.



Model image, showing the described depth and openness of the facade expression in which the outermost layer understands itself as a restrained threshold between the blurring live inside and outside the building.

The stillness of the architecture towards the city registers but does not simulate or imitate the liveliness of it. The entire structure becomes a deep threshold which allows an absorption of the spacial complexity and deep layered-ness of spaces behind it. It directs the view of the external spectator onto the life which takes place behind it and allows for long, oblique vistas through the structure and corners of the building while simultaneously emphasizing the look outwards into the city.

As a strong piece of architecture, the building seeks to make a statement against the ongoing "scenographication" in London's architectural discourse, elaborating in a play of the depth, light and shadow connected in an ambiguous abstraction the building which ultimately wishes to be read as a social sculpture, with the expression of an open, democratic society.



Computer drawing, showing the south-face of the design.