



Interiors Buildings Cities, "Palace" Graduation Studio

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Reflection

Looking back at months of work that lead to clarification of the project for the new building of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp (M HKA) a big body of research supported the final outcome. This was done first as a part of the collective effort, which is the core approach of the Interiors Buildings Cities studio in which the work was developed, to be later complemented by my own fascinations that expanded certain parts of the preliminary faze.

The immense complexity of the contemporary art world asks for a conscious consideration, when a new building for such institution is to be established. The Museum carries a strong history of influence, and as a cultural entity holds great importance within the society, for it both represents and reflects its values. Dealing with such project as a studio asked us to investigate multiple potentially contradicting ideas. Starting from the overview of contemporary art world, its inherent politics, power dynamics and conflicts that are then translated to the image of the contemporary art gallery, we were asked to formulate our own positions towards those issues to influence our proposals.

In parallel, a study was carried out in form of precedent analysis through modelling, drawing, and photography in order to build a collective ground of understanding for both the museum buildings, and a variety of spaces of display that they contain. A small design exercise was proposed in which we each designed an exhibition space for particular artist from the collection of the M HKA.

Thus formed early conceptual attitudes towards the contemporary art world and image of its gallery was then complemented by thorough research about the site, the context of Antwerp as cultural, social and urban setting, its history, material culture and availability of resources. At the end, our individual projects had to be developed in context of an existing competition brief for the new museum, issued by the government. The brief acknowledges inherent discrepancies between the technical requirements and the anti-museum fascinations, asks for industrial roughness and domestic intimacy, and paints the new building as both a robust skeleton and a volatile space for experimentation.

Set on technically demanding site with complex underground conditions, occupied by existing structure in an important location in the South of Antwerp, mitigating between the river and the park, the project became very difficult but also thought provoking. It asked us, as soon-to-be young architects to make cautious and considerate decision, in which all of the aforementioned aspects had to be mitigated, while allowing our own voice to resonate.

From the very beginning of the project the mentors made us aware that the act of architectural design is non-linear, and sometimes a direction of the project needs to go back and re-route in order to come to an fruitful end. This became especially true for my process, in which despite implementing a clear strategy of re-purposing parts of the existing building I spend a lot of time testing different solutions through vast array of techniques: collages, models, hand drawing and digital modelling. This was a constant back and forth between the technical requirements of the structure, the questions of the exterior expression, cost efficiency, interior qualities and sequences, the identity of the institution and presence in the neighbourhood. All of the above required entangled research inquires, seeking references and understanding the nature of

what is it that I am trying to achieve, for which the preliminary knowledge gathered by the studio proved invaluable.

The act of collecting all iterations of the design, and thoughts behind them, in the project journal made this period, frustrating at times, much more productive. At the end, reflectively analysing those versions and clearly formulating the ideas, backed by the collective body of knowledge allowed me to really understand the qualities I am seeking and lead to the final version of the design. Looking back, those difficult times were necessary and the project would not have been developed without going through the whole of the process, even if it took a lot of time stress and effort.

The attitude of IBC, in which all of the mentors are there to teach all of the students provided me with great guidance through that difficult process, and different perspectives allowed me to find my own attitude. Discussing the project through range of scales, and the effect of each architectural decision on them was central part of each tutorial session. Stressing the dynamic correlation between the architectural strategies and technical aspects of a complex project was important from the very beginning, which I really enjoyed. This was translated into the work, as an expression of accountability for each and every gesture, synthetic or programmatic. It was always stressed the fact that young architects need to have a good knowledge of how things are being realized in practice, and how much technology is intertwined with society and its constructs. In the final proposal I am building a lot from those remarks, as the projects seeks to find quality in utilising cheap durable materials, and builds interior quality from structural necessity.

The way I see it now, the decision of embarking on reusing an existing structure, which stems from my deep belief in architect's responsibility for the environment, opened up a lot of possibilities for the design, but increased its complexity adding another layer of meaning to an already complicated project. It was the first time in my education that I was able to work in such context, and solving it at the end makes me especially proud. Yet, it also made me realize shortcomings of the curriculum, which only just starts to consider teaching young architects to find value in things that already exist, and to embrace difficulties that working with them could mean for the designers.

The project maintains a strong connection to TU Delft's masters track in Architecture. It delves into the realms of representation within the urban setting and strives to integrate various layers of meaning from the identity of public institution through its image within the city to the way in which it accommodates people and works of art. Finding qualities in utilizing cost-effective material compositions, efficiency, and sustainable solutions play significant role in informing the design.

In the following weeks I want to focus on exploring in great detail the potential of my project to further enrich its immediate surroundings with small but important gestures, together with refining the interior qualities of the galleries. In doing so, I will be able to make sure that the design is adequately represented through all of the scales, and that in each of them it brings the quality that a large public cultural institution should strive to achieve.