

45 EXPERIENCE, INTUITION AND CONCEPTION

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45.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the report of a design process of a student of Adriaan Geuze. The report describes the design for the transformation of a grain silo in Katendrecht, Rotterdam, into a residential structure. Each illustration indicates an important step in the design process.

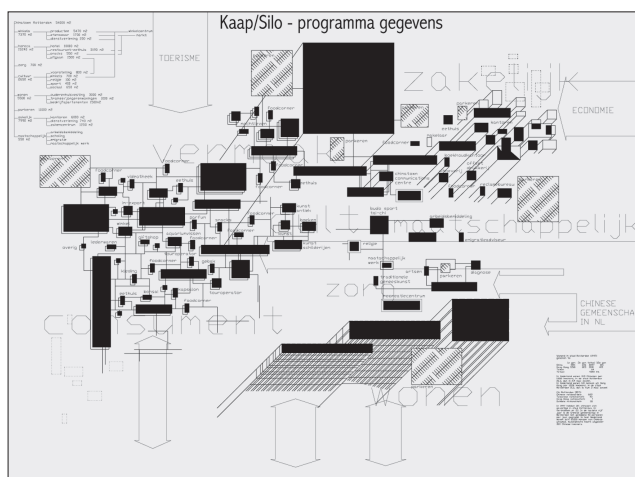
45.1	Introduction	419
45.2	Design process	419

I am convinced that personal events, anecdotes, passion, urge for survival and fear of dying are contributing greatly to 'quality' and creative products. Callas, Cruyff, Otis Redding, but also Aldo, all have employed at a time methods (probably intuitively and unconsciously) to link together their youth, passion and talents. I have often experienced that it is possible to connect one's students to their own background, dreams and affinities and that through this a more intensive and authentic result is generated. Designing by your gut is also proven to be attainable by some people. Allergies and frustrations may well feed a design process. It is possible to put nightmares on a pedestal and next dance in triumph around it.

It is my experience that in Design Schools (like the one in Eindhoven) the intuitive and the subjective are considered the most important values; in Delft we term this unscientific, not fit for engineers. Yet we must learn to draw from these mysterious reservoirs, these pits of degeneration and suffering. It is important that this will yield nothing, if at the same time the systematics, the context, the programme of requirements and the feasibility are not taken into account. That should also be taught to our students. How to connect one's own difficult young age to the question put by a principal or school? Unfortunately, self-respect and insight into one's personal character and roots are obligatory; and I do not know how that would be done within a method.

I will explain my ideas concerning the design process on the basis of the graduation project of a student of mine, Marten de Jong, who made a design for the Elevator Building in southern Rotterdam. The design trajectory may be rendered in various characteristic stages. In my personal design process I am making these steps as well, although at a higher speed because of routine. It comes even to a point, that I go through the first and the last stages concurrently, since they are the most interesting ones.

45.2 DESIGN PROCESS

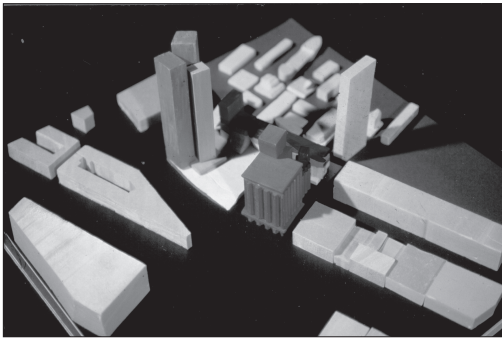


414 Stage I Analysis of the location

Analysis of the location and quantitative study of the programme of requirements are very important; that way ideas may emerge you would never have discovered just by yourself. In the present case it concerned the questions: What is going on in Rotterdam? What is happening with an area transforming from a nautical one into a residential one? The analysis intended to study how the Chinese community might be able to take residence here. The final product of this stage was a programme of requirements for that site.

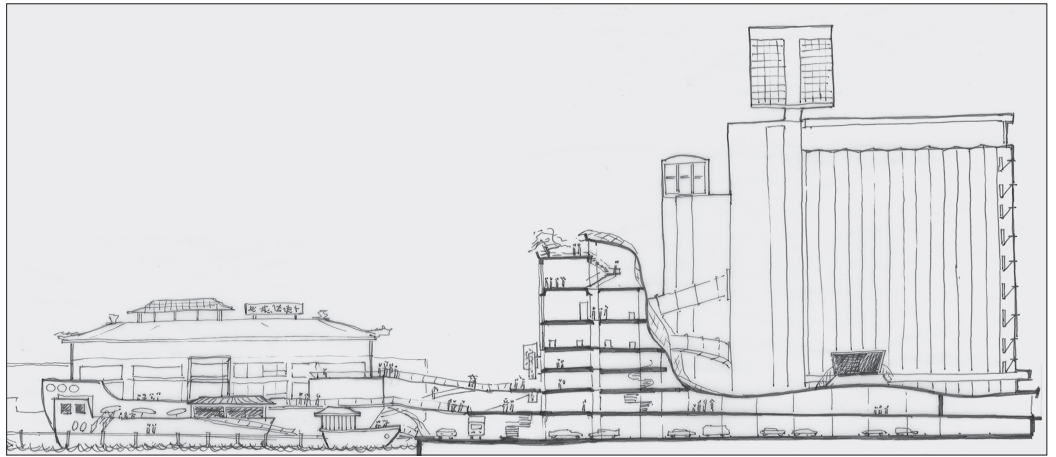
Of the location Marten de Jong said: "I selected the building, not the location. However, such a factory is obviously located somewhere; that proved to be Katendrecht. At that moment, and, maybe, still now, a rather 'hot spot' in Rotterdam. In order to come to grips with the context of the task put to myself, an analysis of Katendrecht was indispensable. To get it really at my fingertips thorough analysis was needed; history, plans for the future, development plans, earlier initiatives, spatial effectiveness, fascinations in the environment, connections of Katendrecht with the rest of the city, traffic analysis, etc.. With such a variety of perspectives you do sense more quickly whether certain solutions are good or bad. A good solution is linking all these aspects, addresses them all; half a solution just does not work. 'What I wanted to do in the first place' is then also not working anymore, I just wanted to do something with the building, not with the area as a whole. And as soon as the location started to play a rôle, the first pre-occupations were already long off the table."

The area of the grain silo: Katendrecht, used to be a China town, a red-light district, and was cleared in a city renovation project. With the data from the study Marten then interviewed members of the Chinese community.



415 Stage II Making the findings spatial

During this stage the main thing is to make the programme of requirements spatial, piling up little building boxes, whilst keeping in mind the luggage of the programme of requirements just developed. Marten discovered that the programme could be realised in an existing elevator building. That complex could be stripped inside and voids could be filled in with the programme. This was the beginning of his study.



416 Stage III Specific questions

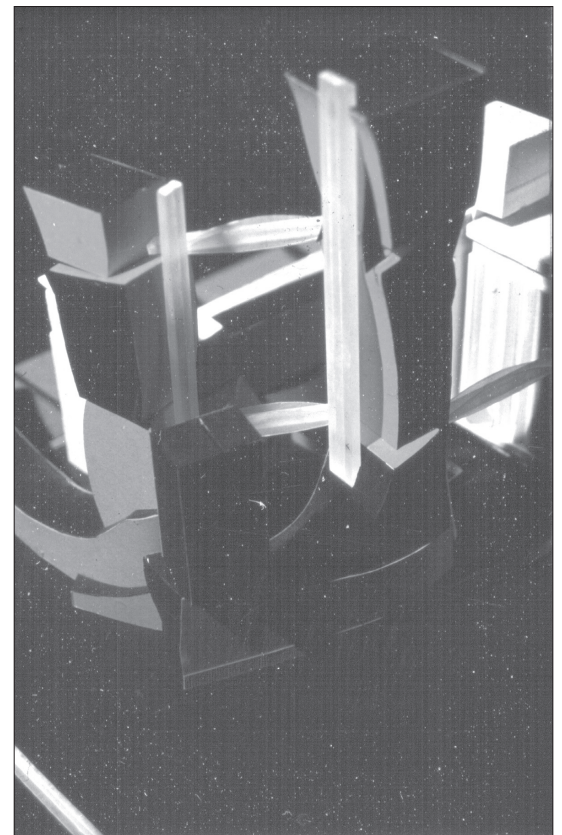
When this preliminary work was done, Marten could formulate the questions of the study. They were two: Can a post-war industrial monument serve a programme with a high social profile? And: What is the meaning of architecture for a cultural minority? It is a highly interesting question, since it is involving a taboo in The Netherlands. What to do with minorities: do you build especially for them, or do you see to it that they adapt themselves?



417 Stage IV Study of material and construction

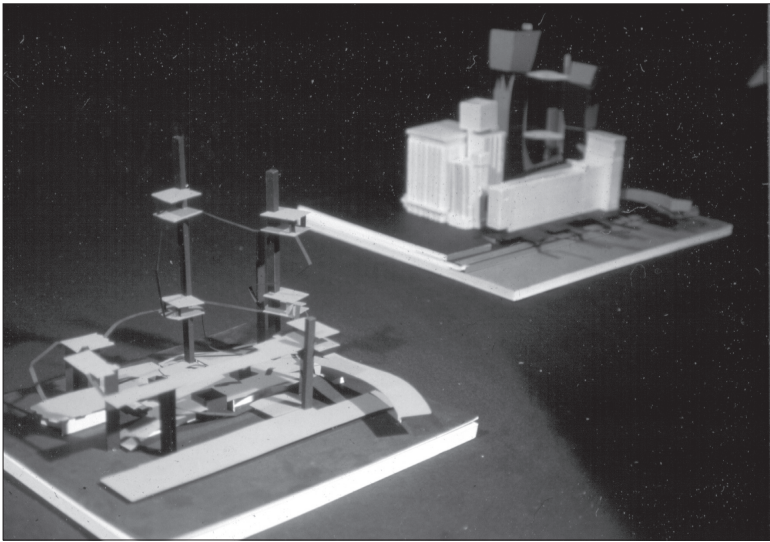
Next, a study was conducted – among other points – of the possibilities offered by the existing concrete construction. It was important to assess how many holes could be drilled in it.

I considered it to be of great importance that Marten would be steeping himself in Chinese architecture, that he would go to Peking so to speak and that he would read a great many books. The results of his study contributed greatly to his design. One of the most significant conclusions from the study of Chinese architecture proved to be that empty surfaces as we know in modern architecture are completely absent in the Chinese tradition of building. Other discoveries included, for instance, the significance of the circle, Feng Shui and detailing. In addition the massive use of colour was striking. These findings became guiding motives in the design.



418 Stage V Stuck

Just as in each graduation process, Marten got stuck at a certain moment in time. He knew everything, but could not go anywhere. He discovered that the adding of all conclusions does not lead to a sound design. It was not beautiful; it was too much; it did not fit. He had soaked up everything like a sponge and could neither advance nor retreat.



419 Stage VI Gaining depth

The first step towards a solution was halving the programme to be developed; opting for the most inspiring part; and, within it, what was the most promising. That meant coming out, completely subjectively, from his personal background and historical past. The part he selected was the Elevator Building.

For the design he needed more self-confidence, more trust in his own fantasy, getting rid of that Delftish stuff called reasoning. Then a grand formal language was unleashed, a quest for his own sources, for inspiration.

How to apply in such a business-like, 'Rotterdammed', stark and inhabitable building a warm and juicy layer? The answer resulted from the study of the location, from the interviews he had with members of the Chinese community and the study of Chinese architecture he had now to conduct one more time with the new insights in the back of his head.

In addition I asked him to study the work of Leonidov in order to find a link between the theatrical and the functional.



420 Stage VII Beyond being pleased by one's self

The final stage is all about testing in order to allow architecture to emerge. All vague hypotheses and conclusions are being built and tried out. Marten worked with models on two scale levels, 3D computer models and day-light studies of the weird façade that should make for a Chinese sky-line with three slender towers like fighting Chinese dragons on the building; in order to understand them he made experiments, scale 1: 1, of design, like railings and details.

During this stage the model is important, for sculpturing, in order to get the programme into one's hands. This stage is about synthesis, the integration of all aspects. You should look at the model on your knees; the architecture must become sensual and physical, getting dirty hands, enjoyment. You must really look, get the design out of the world of thought, making it more erotic, more beautiful with your imagination. In this, Marten was a champion.

This stage is important as a prevention of the snugness for which designers are often known. Students usually postpone this stage until the week before the presentation. However, in this stage the plan is ripening, the design is born, then it is becoming great fun. This stage is the true architectural act really. It is partying on many scale levels with very many media.

The final result had many layers, a construction in concrete, Chinese culture, an erotic layer. Following that, you must go back again to the point of departure for a presentation of the first water and a very precise documentation of what you have found out and what the results are. I recognise all this in my own work. The final stage is the nicest. You say good-bye to your pre-occupations. During this stage the project is born. It is a holistic utopia.

Each process is different, but stage VII is characterising my work. My lectures are also used often. A speaker, a performer should make a story an interesting one; that 'interesting' is the design incident, is what makes a design convincing. At Delft University this emotional side of designing has been obliterated completely. The analysis is coming later, but is also ingrained in my pragmatic nature as an engineer.

