In Search of Contrasts

P4 reflection | Lilian Baumgärtel | Interiors Buildings Cities | September

The central topic of our studio for our Master-Thesis was the *intimate city room.* Part of our research was to learn what intimacy in the city means and how intimacy is created in an urban environment. To start our research the studio researched four different cities, Naples, Milan, Paris and Vienna. We concluded our research during the first quarter with a model of a city room. Afterwards we proceeded with our main design assignment, a public building in Antwerp.

Intimacy in the porous city

Our research started by looking into four different cities, Naples, Milan, Paris and Vienna. My research group analysed Naples. During our excursion in Naples it became quickly clear how intimate rooms in Naples are created. Naples' intimate public spaces are not in the interior, but in the exterior. The void is as much urban space as is the building mass. Private live spreads out onto the street creating ambiguous spaces, where one wonders if they are public or private. Spaces in different scales (alleys, streets, courtyards, squares) create a cluster of sequences. Those spaces contrast each other in pace, lightening and materiality. Each of those spaces has a different level of intimacy. The are no physical barriers between those spaces, but in-between-spaces, where two spaces meet, create some kind of barriers signalling a change of intimacy. Naples is a porous city; the sequences of different connecting voids create the public space.

As a conclusion of P1 of our Master-Thesis we each build a model of a city room without a function or a context. My model was inspired by the palazzi in Naples. In contrast to palazzi in other Italian cities, the palazzi in Naples have a very generic façade. The streets in Naples are narrow and the tall facades are rarely something one pays attention to in those alleys as one never has a full view of them. Instead the architects of the Neapolitan palazzi payed a lot of attention to the courtyard, which show the wealth of the owners. Those courtyards are a strong contrast to the alleys which lead to them. The alleys are narrow and dark, the facades modest. The courtyards are rich, light and playful.

Similarly, to that I designed a model of my city room with a generic façade, but with a playful interior. The façade is heavy with simple opening in a regular cluster. The inside is a light tent construction. The tent is constructed with a light steel construction dressed in a light, white fabric.

Our research of P1 concluded that Naples creates intimate spaces by sequences of contrasting spaces. One doesn't need physical barriers to mark to a visitor that he is

entering a private space. What interested me most about Naples is are those contrasted. Contrasts is also a reoccurring topic throughout my Master-Thesis.

P1 city room model: contrast between hard outside and soft inside

Analysing Naples as method to learn about intimate city rooms and how to read a city has certainly been interesting. At the beginning of the semester the city room was still undefined. But after P1 we all had our own idea of city room is. But at this point I would also like to question the method of researching a different city. While I appreciate learning from references, analysing a city in detail, that is not the city of our design project, seems ineffective and a bit contradictory to a studio which is very concerned about context. I understand that our tutor's main intention was, that we learn through those all four cities Naples, Vienna how to read a city, but ultimately the knowledge exchange between the four student groups researching the different cities was insufficient.

What I though appreciated during P1 was thought the model of the city room. It was a good start to begin thinking about what intimacy in an urban environment means. Since its without context or function the models became often highly conceptional spaces, displaying different ideas. Building my own model was certainly helpful, but also seeing the models of my fellow students gave opportunity to interesting discussions about intimacy.

Zurenbourg: neighbourhood of contrasts

After the conclusion of P1, we started our research of Antwerp. We analysed different neighbourhoods. The neighbourhood I looked into was Zurenborg. Zurenborg is famous for its residentials bourgeois townhouses built in the end of the 19th century. Zurenborg almost seems artificial with its houses in various neo-historical styles and art-nouveau houses.

But what I found especially interesting was the harsh contrast of Zurenborgs residential area to its industrial area. There had been a gas-industry in Zurenborg. Both Zurenborg residential area and the industry have once been attracted to Zurenborg as the neighbourhood is connected to the train. Those contrasts have seemingly co-existed since almost a century, but they seemingly have never touched.
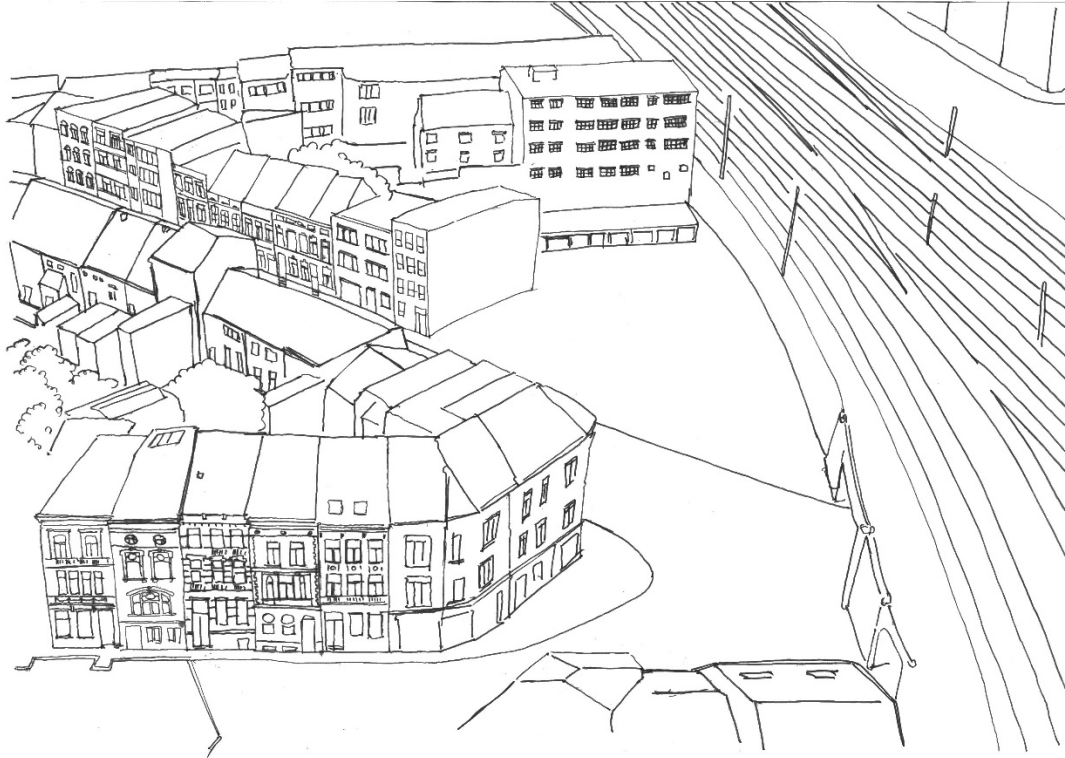
drawing of the plot: art nouveaux houses in the foreground and the warehouses in the background

I found a plot where exactly those contrast clash. It borders to the residential neighbourhood, the elevated train tracks. On the plot are to old warehouses, build at the beginning of the 20th century. The plot has something strange, surrealistic. Different angles and scales meet.

As a program I choose a secondary art-school. Exactly the contrasts between the highly refined residential houses and the industrial area make the plot attractive for an art-school. In its absurdity and opportunity of offering many different spatial experiences I believe it has the potential to be a very inspirational space.

The art-school also inhabits an art-gallery, which can also be separated from the school and thus offer local artists the opportunity to rent the space to show their art.

With the presentation of the plot, analysis of Zurenborg and the neighbourhood, the P2 of my Master-Thesis ended.

The plot is interesting with its contrast meeting in a small space. The small, relatively ugly plot shows a lot of potential, which I explored during the following semester.
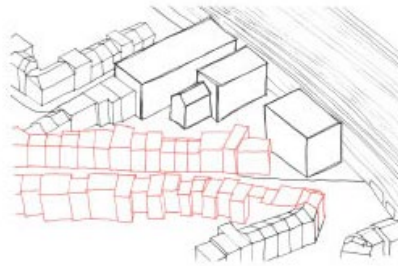
Industry meets Zurenborg

The central questions of my design were: How does my school building help experience those different contrasts already there in the school and how does the school meet the public.
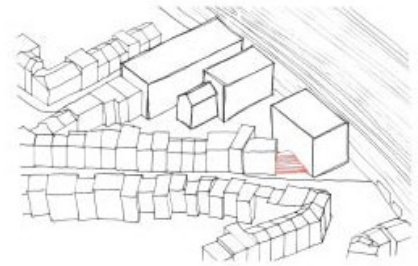
I started my design by testing different volumes. I concluded with creating a "third warehouse" adding to the existing two. A small additional building ends the existing street of residential buildings. An urban staircase mediates between those structures.
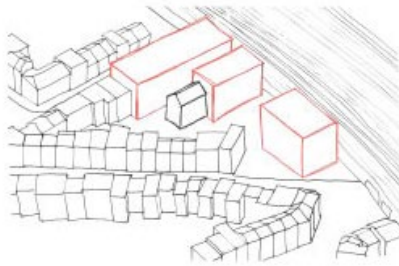
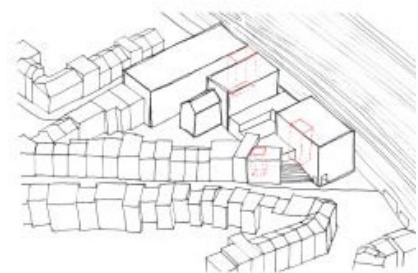Adding of third 'warehouse'   Volume ending the street   urban staircase

This urban staircase gives me also the opportunity to have two main entrances, one for the school and one for the art-gallery. Those two buildings are connected with the existing structure through a connecting building, which not only is a horizontal connection, but is also the heart of the school, with the art gallery in the ground floor and study/recreational area on the first floor. I also added a staircase between the two existing warehouses, serving as a vertical connection between the floors as well as a horizontal connection between those buildings.
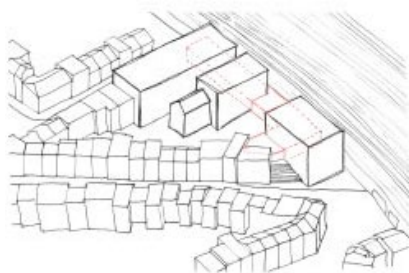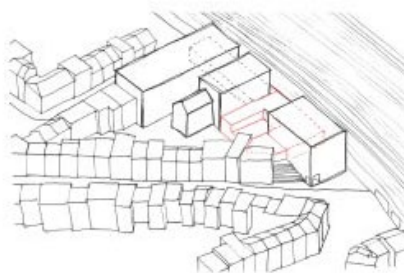
vertical connection   connecting building with gallery   staircases

The building for the horizontal connection is, where one experiences the contrasts of the plot the best. In the art gallery one enters from the street into a building that almost seems underground, almost like a grotto, leading from the foyer to the auditorium or the art gallery. In the art gallery one can already get glimpse into the upper floor, where the school is
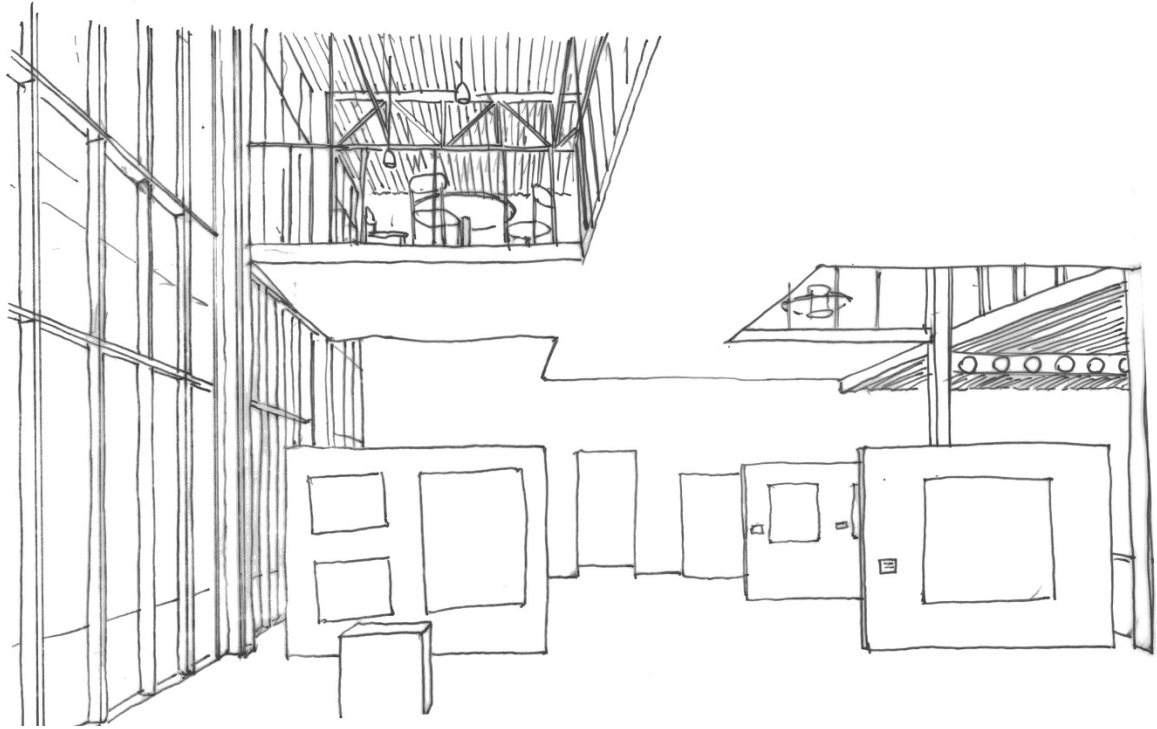
groundfloor: ground floor with view on the upper floor of the school

On the first floor after entering the school building enters the space above the art-gallery, one is suddenly faced with the wideness of the train tracks. It's a light space, facing vastness, while the art gallery is more introverted. Opening between those two stories, create a visual connection.
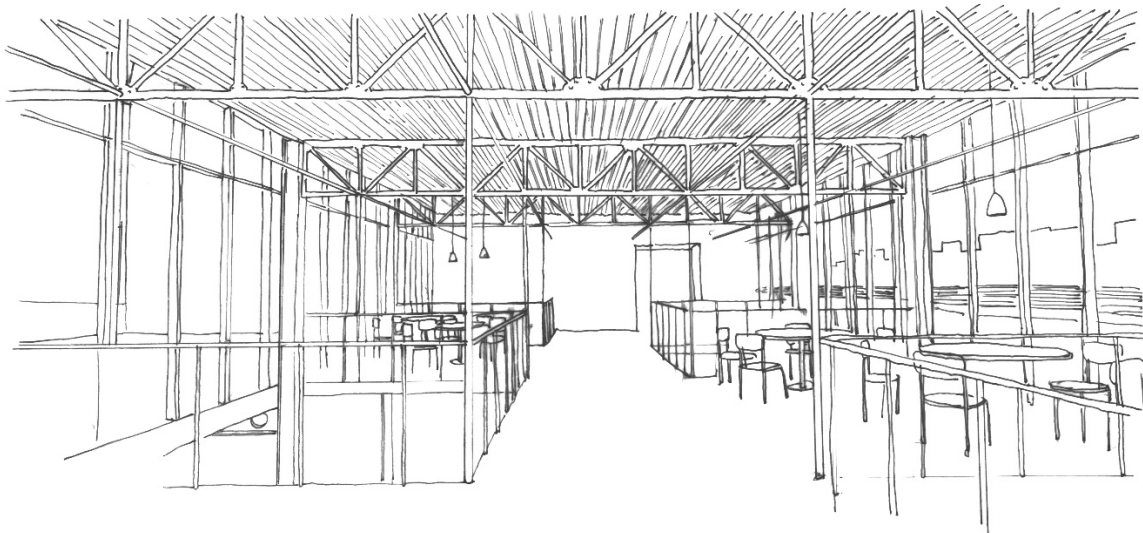
first floor: connecting building out of light steel construction and view on wide train tracks

The materiality of the third warehouse structure is referencing the existing ones. Thus, it is a concrete skeleton structure with a brick façade. The connecting building is a contrast to those volumes and is constructed by a steel structure, making the space feel lighter and more temporary, while the school itself feels heavier.

School as a program and clashing of different logics

Reflecting on my Master-Thesis, I really like my choice of the plot and I'm convinced that the idea of a school on this plot is highly interesting. But both plot and program emerged to also be highly challenging. The plot is interesting because the clash of its contrasts, but exactly this point makes the plot extremely difficult. Lines that follow different logics meet at the plot. The existing plot just doesn't follow an existing pattern, making it hard to create a new building that seems to follow any logic. It is close to impossible to create building that is completely conceptional or seems 'clean'. Different decisions are influenced by factors that don't follow the same logic.

Additionally, my choice of a school program in such a plot heightened the challenge. A secondary art school has an extensive program, with a lot of different functions as e.g. classrooms, studios, exhibition spaces, auditorium, library, gym. The plot is small, and many spaces are difficult to unlock as the wall of the train tracks limits the light that can come into the groundfloor.

All those challenges lead to my failing of my first P4 presentation as I didn't manage to sufficiently answer main questions for the school as e.g. the circulation. I didn't reach the point where one could understand room qualities and as I hesitated with a lot of decisions resulting in drawings that were too vague and simply not clean.

I believe the extended time I got, was appropriate to the difficulty of the project and offered me opportunity to clear things up and develop my design and plans further.

In the end I managed to overcome most difficulties of the plot and my city room successfully creates spaces were one can experience the existing contrasts. The school and the wider public meet at this place, introducing the residents of Zurenborg into the industrial area, which had always been there and yet never been a part of it. With my art gallery I create the first public interior of the neighbourhood.

Reflecting on my design and research methods, I would argue that I would have liked starting researching Antwerp earlier in the first semester as it would have given us more time to consider program and plot.

The second thing I would criticise negatively is my own hesitation of making decisions. As the project is complex, it would have been better if I had decided on a volume earlier, instead of hesitating for too long, trying out many different options.

Lastly, I think I should have studied more school references as many reasons of why I failed P4 were based on functionality of my school. At the same time, I should have defined better the exact program of the school, because a lot of hesitation during the designing was coming from an uncertainty about my room program (do I have enough classrooms? Is my auditorium big enough? Do I really have enough seats in the cafeteria? Are my hallways too

big, too small? Do I need a parking lot or not?). Having a detailed program defined would have probably helped me and I think there should have been a better communication about the program with my tutors.

With my program and plot challenge I created for myself a difficult assignment. But in the same time, I believe that exactly the inherited illogicalness of the plot creates a building that is surprising with its different views and diversity of spaces.

Conclusion

The reoccurring theme in my thesis is contrasts. In Naples we analysed the sequences of spaces and how contrasts emphasize difference between different spaces. My context- and functionless city room model was playing with contrast on an exaggerated conceptional way. Coincidentally, I found a plot with a lot of contrasts in Antwerp, giving me the opportunity to play with contrasts again. I decided to design an art-school based on the idea that the plot offers in its absurdity a lot of opportunity of inspirational spaces. But since the plot is not context- and functionless, themes like school program, circulation, escape routes got added to my Master-thesis.

My city room is the art-gallery, an introverted space that is still visually connected to my school. Between the ground and first floor one can experience different spatial qualities of the context.