

Reflection paper

In this reflection paper, I'd like to touch upon the project itself, as well as the different phases of both collective and individual work that have brought me and the project to this moment in time.

Concisely, my graduation project centres around the potential of the tools of the architect in the reimagination of the material and cultural components of our abandoned industrial heritage. For this, I worked with the site of the Lageweg; The site is situated on the meeting point of the Twentieth century belt of Antwerp and the formerly independent municipality of Hoboken. On the edge of the fine-grained urban fabric of Hoboken sits a large post-industrial plot; largely abandoned in the past decennia and awaiting its redevelopment as part of the cities' ongoing densification. In the concatenation of halls and workshops that steadily grew from the early 20th century onwards, different metallurgical industries produced a multitude of products, ranging from oil barrels for the neighbouring petroleum industry, to car rims for German manufacturers and to beautifully decorated tin boxes which have today become sought after collectables. The physical remnants of these industrial processes tell a story of a quickly industrialised country. A development that relied heavily on exploitative labour conditions and extractive practices both in Belgium and in its colonies. Yet, one that simultaneously resulted in a rapid growth of Hoboken's population and the emergence of a vivid community life, that subsequently suffered notably when the companies moved their production elsewhere. How does one imagine a renewed life among these remnants of a past productivity? One in which a polluting extractive industry no longer has a place, but in which its productive nature is still valued? In search of an answer to these questions, my project marries ambitions from our collectively designed masterplan with the themes that are raised in my research. In doing so, the design proposes a secondary school that offers vocational education which focusses on construction in a non-extractive manner. A place to share knowledge on and learn how to re-use, how to repair, and how to build with reclaimed building materials alongside those that can be grown and/or produced regeneratively. As a material starting point, the project composes of two existing industrial buildings, as well as structural elements from the disassembled halls that currently stand next to it.

The P1 research, which I undertook together with Bérénice Demiddeleer, Lance Schroten and Merle Schmidt-Jürgensen provided a historic perspective on the long development of Hoboken and our given site. Through this research, in which the fieldwork proved instrumental, we gained a better understanding of the site's role in Hoboken's industrial history, as well as its social significance. It is also fair to say that this collective process allowed me to develop a more comfortable relationship with the act of doing fieldwork, which helped greatly in the following personal research.

The following phase, in which Sacha Oberski, Richard Múdry and myself devised of a masterplan for the site, was of significant importance in 'getting a grip' on the site. Previously, I had felt rather overwhelmed by the site's sheer complexity and enormity. Yet, the design process of the masterplan, in which the large 1:333 scale model proved to be a useful design tool, slowly allowed us to better understand the site, as well as its merits and challenges. Furthermore, some of the collectively phrased ambitions in the masterplan became important starting points for our personal projects, which all still 'coexist' alongside each other.

Despite having a clear interest from the start, my personal research, which I started developing alongside the collective work, did not develop easily. Among other things, one of the reasons for this has been my confusion with what I understand to be (academic) research and what this term entails in the studio and the master track at large (i.e. what is expected). After the first developments in the setting up of a brief for the design of a vocational school however, I managed to find more direction in the research, as it allowed me to become more specific. Visiting the different vocational schools in the area, observing their practice and talking with the pedagogical directors, teachers and students, helped me to understand and acknowledge that Flanders has an existing culture and practice of vocational education in construction from which valuable lessons can be learned (see catalogue).

Continuing the theme of building upon what is there, I set out to work with both two existing buildings as well as a multitude of different (reconfigured) components from the surrounding halls in the design of the new structure which is placed inside the school. This ambition resulted in a series of site visits, in which I, often slightly overwhelmed by the site's material reality, started photographing, measuring, modelling and drawing both the buildings and components with which I wanted to work. Despite the fact that this phase proved fundamental in the design process, I had a hard time not losing myself in every little detail that I encountered, as the scale of the project and the allotted time simply did not allow for it. Consequently, I gave myself a hard time for not being able to consider every little corner of the existing buildings, as well as not managing to 'properly' make a structured inventory of the reconfigured components which I use in the design. Towards p4, I realised that I had potentially been overambitious in the challenges that I had posed myself. Yet, still believing in the premise of the project, I decided that I should focus on certain fragments of the project in which the reconfigured elements feature, rather than wishing to be able to trace back every single component.

When reflecting on the design decisions that I have made throughout the process and the conversations and feedback that followed, one theme is most prominent. The question where and when to follow the nature of the existing buildings, and when to 'break free' kept reappearing. Despite having developed certain insecurities regarding this topic, I still believe in the decisions that I made. Operating within a subdivision of the structural grid of the existing buildings allowed me to cherish the spatial qualities that drew me to the buildings in the first place. Furthermore, it allows for a climate strategy in which only parts of the building need to be completely insulated and conditioned, aligning with the wish to be mindful of both the origin, as well as the amount of materials used in the design. Lastly, I believe that the scheme, which is characterised by a strong repetition and a simple spatial configuration and sober material use, manages to honour both the buildings' productive past and future. In this approach, the reconfigured skylight, that becomes a canopy at the entrance of the passage, serves as a playful anomaly in the otherwise sober and pragmatic architecture.