

Reflection Paper

Home Beyond Walls

Stories and Traces as echoes of Belonging

Bérénice Demiddeleer – 5866103

Studio Name: Urban Architecture – Low Town Downtown

Graduation Year: 2024-2025

Mentors: Rosie van der Schans / Architecture

Leeke Reinders / Research

Lex van Deudekom / Building Technologies

Introduction

This reflection accompanies “Home Beyond Walls,” a project shaped by walking, listening, and learning about how places carry stories. Located in Hoboken, a neighborhood undergoing rapid change, the work developed as an ongoing dialogue between research and design, as well as between traces of the past and prospects for the future. What began as questions of architecture and belonging evolved into a deeper exploration of how individuals respond to change, care for what remains, and imagine what might be. In this reflection, I revisit the process that united memory, structure, and community, and explain how each step influenced the next, shaping a spatial response that extends beyond the walls and into a common space.

Question 1 | What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (Ar, Ur, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

My project focuses on the fragmented urban fabric of Lage Weg in Hoboken, exploring how architecture, by listening to the stories of the place and people, can create a sense of belonging to spaces, bridging personal and communal needs. This approach aligns with the studio's goal of revitalizing medium-sized urban areas through socially and historically informed design. Therefore, drawing from the studio's site-specific, research-driven approach, I endorse the role of the architect seen as a mediator navigating social, historical, political, and cultural concerns in places undergoing transition. My project aims to reveal and activate the potential of an area shaped by industrial legacies, housing experiments, infrastructure voids and informal uses, an area caught between past conditions and future aspirations.

By engaging with the everyday urban conditions and inherited structures, my work aligns with the Architecture Master Track, which encourages us to design beyond isolated buildings and to understand architecture as part of larger spatial and societal systems.

The focus on contextual sensitivity, adaptive reuse, and the integration of temporary and informal dynamics demonstrates the track's goal of approaching architecture as a catalyst for meaningful urban transformation.

On a broader scale, the project aligns with the objectives of the MSc in Architecture, Urbanism, and the Built Environment (AUBS) program, which promotes multidisciplinary, community-oriented, and ecologically aware design practices.

Question 2 | How did your research influence your design/ recommendations and how did the design/ recommendations influence your research?

The project emerged from a strong research foundation that delved into Hoboken's socio-industrial history, current urban fragmentation, and the roles of craft and storytelling in shaping a sense of place. This investigation began with collective work from P1, where we created a film tracing the various "tides", historical, social, and spatial, that have influenced Hoboken over time. The research began as a process of exploration, intentionally getting lost to uncover and unravel the traces of time and human presence embedded in the urban fabric.

Building upon this historical perspective, I then focused on understanding how Hoboken's residents live today: their connection to their environment, their sense of attachment or belonging, and, most importantly, their stories. Listening to these narratives deepened my understanding of the place and allowed me to ground any future design in lived experience.

Therefore, this research significantly influenced the design in several ways:

- Historical narratives and local testimonies guided the development of the master plan, highlighting and preserving places of significance for the community. These considerations also guided the choice of the site, located on the site of the factory's former main entrance, including the former offices, changing rooms, and canteen. This site served as a boundary between work and daily life, holding strong symbolic and practical significance for the workers. It has become a key anchor for exploring how contemporary architecture can reconnect with layers of collective memory.
- Interviews, participatory meetings, and walks through the neighborhood revealed the importance of enabling people to actively participate in shaping their environment. In response, the housing typologies I developed are intentionally flexible, allowing residents to adapt their living spaces. This approach supports the idea of co-authorship and reinforces their sense of ownership and belonging.
- The inclusion of collective programs, such as a library that gathers and shares local stories and a community center that encourages everyday interactions and co-creation, was directly inspired by research into informal gathering spaces. These interventions address the identified need for neutral, accessible spaces that different social groups can relate to and share.

In turn, the design process challenged the research to be more precise and spatially grounded. It pushed me to translate abstract themes like interaction, flexibility, and belonging into architectural language and physical strategies.

Overall, it was a reciprocal process in which research and design continually informed and refined each other, creating a multi-layered and responsive approach rooted in both place and people.

Question 3 | How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

My approach, combining on site narratives, ethnographic walks, and narrative mapping, allowed me to anchor the project in the lived reality of Hoboken. These methods enabled a rich and multidimensional understanding of the place, going beyond conventional spatial analysis and programming, giving voice to past and present communities.

Initially, I focused heavily on historical aspects, often immersing myself in archival documents and imagery. While this at times made me feel lost in the past, it ultimately sparked a real fascination and a deeper connection with the site. Exploring Hoboken became a way to integrate traces of the past into the current landscape I know, revealing how memory and spatial transformation are interwoven.

I encountered a similar challenge while working on interviews and narratives. At first, I struggled to clearly define what I was looking for, which made it difficult to extract meaning from the mass of stories collected. Transcribing words into drawings gradually helped me transform abstract experiences into physical forms, allowing the research to establish itself within the emotional and physical landscape of the site.

The iterative process, alternating between research, sketching, and physical modelling, was essential for maintaining a strong link between analysis and design. It kept the work grounded and ensured that the design was not a separate layer, but a direct continuation of the research findings.

In terms of my architectural approach, I began with physical volume models to test massing and relationships at the master plan scale. From there, I transitioned into in-depth architectural research on the existing buildings, studying structural logic, former layouts, and their current conditions. This part was particularly challenging, as the buildings are now abandoned, partially squatted, and physically difficult to access. Entering the completely dark, silent, and decaying buildings alone, was initially intimidating. However, this hands-on documentation became a turning point in the

project: by drawing and cataloging the buildings in detail, I was able to develop proposals grounded in a precise understanding of the place.

As the year progressed and I gained a deeper understanding of the site, the master plan itself evolved. Lessons learned from research and feedback led me to revisit and adjust the surrounding new urban fabric, allowing the design to respond more precisely to the spatial, social, and ecological conditions discovered along the way.

Overall, my method was demanding, sometimes messy, and fraught with uncertainty, but it allowed me to work with care and depth. It reaffirmed that architecture, particularly in complex post-industrial contexts, requires careful listening, spatial empathy, and continuous iteration.

Question 4 | How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope, and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

This graduation project aims to create architecture that fosters adaptability, spatial agency, and inclusive engagement in urban environments influenced by social, historical, and ecological change. By transforming an abandoned industrial site in Hoboken into a new residential and public infrastructure, the project examines how architecture can respond to evolving needs while reinforcing existing cultural and spatial narratives.

From an academic perspective, this work contributes to discussions on adaptive reuse, flexible housing, and participatory urban transformation. It illustrates how narrative research, based on site visits, interviews, and mapping, can inform design in contextually specific and structurally open ways. By integrating social inquiry into iterative design processes, the project offers a methodology suited to equally complex or transient urban conditions.

In terms of societal value, the project addresses both physical vacancy and social fragmentation by introducing new layers of living, learning, and gathering spaces. The central park acts as a connective landscape and offers opportunities for community gardens, informal activities, and ecological continuity. The integration of public programs, such as a community center and library, further anchors the site in daily life and encourages long-term engagement with diverse user groups. These spaces actively contribute to social infrastructure by providing support, fostering encounters, and ensuring cultural continuity.

Ethically, this project is guided by the principles of spatial agency, adaptability, and long-term relevance, values that address both architectural responsibility and social transformation.

- Socially, the project values the role of architecture as a support for everyday participation and informal engagement. By integrating a library and community center into the living environment, it establishes programmatic anchors for education, support, and cultural exchange. These accessible spaces are actively shaped by and for the community, fostering a sense of belonging.
- From an ecological perspective, the reuse of the existing structure demonstrates a conscious desire to work with what already exists, avoiding demolition and adopting a circular approach to materials. Techniques such as reclaimed brick slips, and prefabricated timber facades minimize the environmental impact while strengthening the continuity between the site's past and future uses.
- Architecturally, the project is designed to evolve. Thanks to demountable lightweight walls, modular layouts, and expandable housing, residents are free to reshape their environment over time. This promotes flexibility, resilience, and user autonomy, allowing the architecture to adapt to changing needs.

The ethical strength of the project lies in its openness and responsiveness. Rather than imposing a rigid structure, it offers a framework for continuous reinvention, inviting residents to co-create their living environment and integrate the architecture with the rhythms and needs of daily life.

Question 5 | How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

This project presents an approach to architecture and urban planning that addresses essential yet intangible aspects of the built environment, such as belonging, identity, and memory. By integrating historical traces, personal narratives, and collective aspirations, the project positions public, semi-public, and private spaces as active contributors to social cohesion and territorial attachment. This framework is relevant well beyond the specific Hoboken site.

Although the proposal is deeply rooted in the context of the Blikfabriek and its surrounding neighborhood, its fundamental design methods and strategies are highly transferable to other urban environments, particularly in post-industrial or transitional contexts where spatial fragmentation and social disconnection are prevalent. Key transferable aspects include:

- A participatory design approach based on narrative and spatial storytelling, using walks, interviews, and mapping to reveal hidden structures of meaning and use.

- The development of flexible housing typologies capable of adapting to changing family structures, social configurations, and future needs.
- The integration of community programs into residential settings as accessible elements of everyday life.

The methodological toolkit employed, rooted in ethnographic observation, visual mapping, and iterative design, is simple enough to adapt yet robust enough to generate in-depth spatial analyses. It encourages designers, planners, and communities to begin by asking themselves what stories a place holds and how these stories can inform future interventions. This process nurtures a place-specific, yet universally relevant, design approach that respects local identity while addressing global challenges such as housing insecurity, ecological responsibility, and the erosion of shared public spaces.

Fundamentally, the project asserts that architecture and urban planning can and must serve as vectors of memory, belonging, and shared identity. In a world increasingly marked by transience and fragmentation, this type of architecture can create anchors: spaces that carry meaning over time and offer residents the opportunity to co-create their environment.

The project does not propose a one-size-fits-all solution. Rather, it offers a replicable approach that emphasizes context, formal flexibility, and the inclusiveness of the process. These principles can be applied in diverse urban contexts where communities seek to reclaim, reimagine, or reconnect with the spaces they inhabit.

