

# Graduation Project Reflection Paper

## Studio Antwerp City Room

### Interiors Buildings Cities

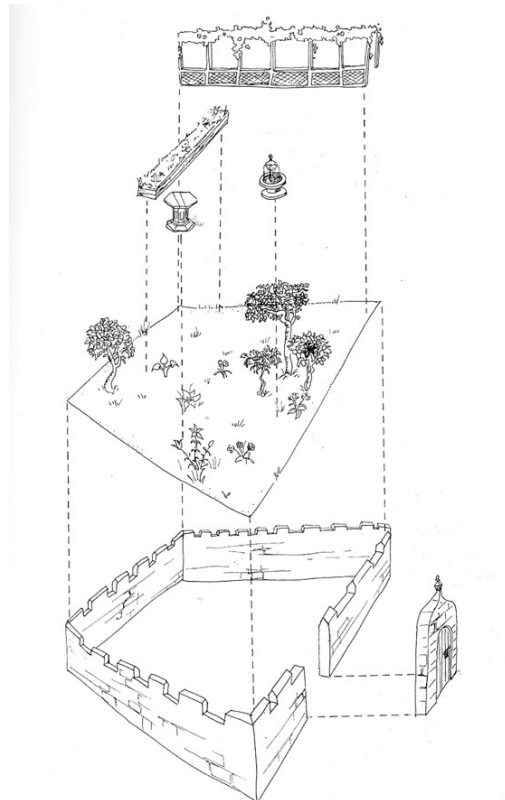
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**Thresholds of Appearance:  
Hortus conclusus as artists hub  
on the edge of city**



#### Introduction

The project starts with the fascination about an evacuated artists residency to the south of Antwerp. It is literally a ruin located between the urban and the open landscape beyond the city perimeter. The residency is composed of two pitched-roof brick houses which stood there since the Antwerp citadel era and remained squatted against several demolition plans. A small walled garden surrounded them as a green enclosure which make the open space a secular and distinctive ground outside the city. All kinds of made up objects, instead of architecture, filled up the garden and define borders through the implementation of such territorial devices. The houses open to the garden and made harmony coalition with respective parts of the enclosed garden, forming a singular room from the interior to the exterior. There are three main observations of the site which would become the starting point of the design.

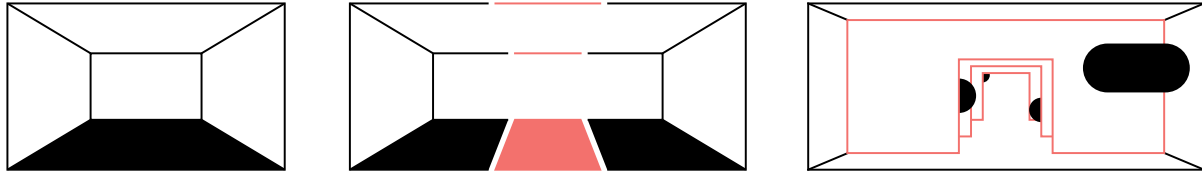
Spontaneous, incremental, temporary composition of space

Feeling of being outside the city, being in another space that escape from the city

Circulations as the intrusive tool to create neutral rooms in mundane space

In order to respond to the need of expansion in terms of scales and programs, the residency asks for an extensive and open design which could accommodate changing needs of the temporary artists. I see the project as an incremental site which could be developed over the course of years, meaning that small scaled structures would be introduced subsequently one after another. The scope of the intervention would be occupying the entire decaying plot adjacent to the existing site, taking away undesirable components for the city, and returning the city with a semi-public open space. These uninhabited buildings would be kept or demolished according to its architectural heritage value. The main concept would be transforming the emptied ground into a "hortus conclusus", an enclosed space that serves society of the city and serves various purposes. It is the archetype of enclosed garden that protects the private precinct from public intrusion. I see duality in an artist residency, on one hand they need space for expression to interact with the public and be intimate with the city, on the other had they need space for isolation and meditation, to get away from the city for their own work.

Hortus conclusus	Design objectives
Hortus catalogi	Temporal, incremental space
Hortus contemplationis	Other space
Hortus ludi	Neutral, appropriative space



### From research to design

The notion of city room is particularly a typological and phenomenological discourse, due to its specific requirement on publicity and social appropriation. Hence the research initiated largely on a certain type of city room, which has been carved out from mundane urban programs and transformed into a circulating, intermediate space for people to wander around. However, it became a derivative but also a restrictive tool in the early stage of design, as I had assumed a certain type of circulation space i.e. corridors being the basis of toolsets, without elaborating on the comprehensive potential of the qualities of this other space in the city. I later re-discovered the existing qualities of the site and expanded the imagination of this public “walled corridor” into a public “walled garden” which allows the design to manoeuvre itself through the space more flexibly. The thorough research on the typology of Arcades in Paris has led to an abrupt literal translation of carved-out heritage buildings which has this inherent corridor in the middle of the space as an intermediate route that diffuses private space into the public realm. Having considered the insensible large-scale gesture adding to the complexity of the project as well as the difficult translation from such indoor route into the open space as found on site.

Combined with the phenomenological aspects of the experiences of going through such passage space in the city, the concept of this sequential city room has transcended into a collection of various scales of circulation space which are connected to form a hortus conclusus, the enclosed garden. Buildings become the circulation where one could enter the garden only through the solid volumes. The garden is then unfolded as a series of pathways of different widths and depths, accommodating different functions and framing portals to the other buildings within the construct. The interior space continues this logic and used this linearity to define the border between what is public and private, hence making a city room that elongates longitudinally and sectionally.

The typology of such artists residency in architectural scale is banal to be understood in the relatively small scale. As the action of the artists are not so relevant to such scale of space but to a wider network of interventions in the city. There are, of course a wide spectrum of spatial typology, ranging from relatively open residencies, to the functional ones which close off their workspace from the city. But instead of looking into the dwelling units itself, it is more consistent to investigate how these entities: dwellings, workspace, and social space, agglomerated and forms a territory. The design strived to respond to how these territories are informed (borders, difference, spatial practices etc.) instead of the architectural typology itself. Bedrooms, kitchens, living rooms, workshops, ateliers etc each have their own scale. What if the scales are mediated and blurred? What if they become ambiguous rooms to one another? Would that suggest a new agglomeration of space that has new publicity and interiority?

### From the intimate city to a city room

While appropriating the walled garden as the city room, the project also constantly engaged with the studio theme, the intimate city. The evaluation of designing an intimate space became an essential struggle throughout every stage and scales of studies. For example, how the massing is related to its urban context in an intimate way, is resolved in a way that the building volumes offset from one another to form smaller courtyards. The sequences of courtyards mediate between the spatial discrepancy between the nature and the urban, creating an intimate meeting point at their border.

It became a dilemma dealing with the large open ground and at the same time creating sense of enclosure within it. Therefore, the openings of buildings and the articulation of garden wall become the crucial element in the play of intimacy. Throughout the design, this thematic framework has been a reasonable constraint to limit the scope of intervention. Even though the project has been deviating quite a bit, that constraint helped minimise the extent of design and made clear and concise distinction of the architectural expression.

## Research Methods

Various large-scale models have been made to study the physical experience dwelling in the city room. Designing the interiors has been quite fresh experience for me as it has taken me onto another level of details and spatial realization. However, it is also part of the crucial reflection that the design must be attacked from all angles, not only inside-out but also shift constantly from one scale to another, from one expression to another, and from one perspective to another.

Apart from typological and phenomenological research, the project also invested a lot on the definition of public space. The design does not seek a trivial definition, but to create a public city room that has social function. I tried to borrow the idea of social space from (Lufeb)Lefebvre's book, *The Production of Space*, in arguing that the city room we have been talking about could be one of the social spaces that he proposed in his triad's theory. How people lived and endured the art space would remain an immaterial yet experiential image in the neighborhood. Through the dynamic inter-relationships between, the lived and endured space (high density of galleries and museums), the perceived space (existing routes or trajectories of relating and passing through these art space), the conceived space (overall picture that this district being a cultural hub), altogether, produce social space over time.



## Addressing the wider social framework

The house being the primitive shelter, the refuge that associate one with memories and daydreams. It is the creative hub that one could exercise their full freedom as they get rid of their public self from the outside world. This agglomeration of pitched-roof architecture has created a curious border condition between the rigid urban block and the soft landscape. The neutral definition of the garden has become a shared ground for the public and artists both to engage and disengage. The new definition of art space would transcend the public imagination towards the art community, thus creating a new interactive display for the artists to grow and nurture. The way the architectural enclosure provided the green space the neighbourhood has craved for, and in addition to that a social space that the public share an ownership to it. It returns the right to space to the people, and a group of artists whom has been striving for survival space within the city. The design could also become a typological model for other artist-in-residence across Europe. As an alternative to museums, galleries and mere residences, the social artist hub could narrow down the distances between artists and the city. The model disengaged art community from being a privileged group.

## Conclusion

One of the leading research questions is the making of a space of appearance for the artists. How one is presented to the public and how a city room could help frame its appearance. The design based largely on the expression of daily routines and livelihoods. It hopes to reiterate the possibilities of how these two distinctive group of city dwellings come across each other by carefully laying out various extent of intersecting space and overlapping trajectories. Through multiple research components and ways of making I have been able to navigate the design through the midst of indefinite concepts and blurring forms and established a firm foundation for such architectural exploration. The emphasis on materiality and interiority has enriched my architectural knowledge a lot which has been proven useful and relevant in contemporary field of practise.