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Peng Lee 5320216

Thesis- SAPPI ISLAND: Rethinking borders.

Brief

This is a project conducted during September 2021 to June 2022 in the graduation studio of Urban architecture. As an “urban” architectural studio, we were tackling with a massive industrial site where paper were made and is still being produced in Maastricht. So it’s not a “former” industrial site (yet), but an on-going factory who’s dealing with the difficulty of the shrinking paper industry, environment and energy issues, vacant buildings or storages, redevelopment plan of the city. It is very exciting for us to deal with a project site that undergoes struggles and difficulties at the moment, but indeed it is also a challenge for us that everything is unknown, everything is depending on new decisions made by the company or municipality.

Gleaning the industrial character

The studio theme is “glaneuse, glaneur,” gleaning from the existing, which easily guide us to look into the existing industrial settings and characters of factories typologies. During the process, I found myself reading the one big industrial site as group factory buildings where goods are manufactured or assembled chiefly by machine along with the facilities. To understand factories, we need to understand both production and operation. The former is usually done by machine as the latter by human, but what we cannot forget is the service or facility provided by buildings which leads to the ensemble of the factories site. The warehouse next to the export matters, the storage close by the machine hall also matters, the tanks, pipes and air ducts indeed matters, the streets matter as much as the adjacent buildings. A factory is always about flows and circulations. In the end, the buildings are designed and placed in certain orders and assembly so that production could be controlled or expanded. Every single roof housed a specific function, but no single roof functions on its own.

The density of the site has become the leading “industrial” character expressed rather than how they actually look. This has a big impact in our earlier urban approach as we don’t see it as junks of vacant or outdated buildings but series of histories and decisions of the paper industry and factory. We take every demolish act considerately (we demolish very little compared to our colleagues) and respect the existing. The new (buildings) are always shaped by the existing.

More peculiar than general

In the individual architectural approach, I found myself adopting similar perspective to our urban approach. I had chosen the paper machine 5 hall as my designated project building since it best featured the paper production, history, development of the Sappi (KNP) paper mill. The machine hall is very long to accommodate the very long paper machine 5 (footprint of 4.25m by 100m). It also has a respectable height of 16.5m with concrete construction on the ground floor and steel construction starting on first floor. First floor is the operation floor for workers to move around the machine which was built from the ground level. Interestingly, the documentation also suggest to call the ground floor basement. A factory’s rules are always attuned to machines just as the space. And how do we use this? How do we adapt the machine-scale or machine-oriented characters into our new program, for new users? I believe this is everyone’s task in the studio.

When dealing with the existing architecture, I find myself very conservative when it comes to tearing things down or cleaning up a surface or building. I understand it’s not a practiced project and also we couldn’t have the opportunity to attend the sites frequently to document all the existing, sense and evaluate all their values in order to utterly glean from them. For someone like me who is a bit obsessive with reality or facts, not seeing every corner really put me on nerves when making decisions. I was always

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reminded to set my own tasks, give priorities to them, and embrace the outcomes, strength or weakness of my project. In fact, during the process, I also find it hard to describe my project when it comes to principles, strategies, or overviews of interventions. Instead, I was more comfortable to talk about specific corners I pay attention to, like scenes. It is rather a peculiar approach than a generic one since every existing piece has their own stories, whether they are parts of buildings or leftover pieces of machines, they create different moments and memory of space. In fact, I try to glean everything I could recognize, which is perhaps not concrete enough to be called an architectural project or concept, but as well the most concrete approach I've developed till now.

It's all about gleaning (Research and Design)

So I started to look at what I glean. First my project started with the individual research topic about borders and boundaries. It was inspired by the experience when walking around the site, -fences, no-entry signs, an isolated factory in relation to its city Maastricht with the material borders and immaterial boundaries. Then, it comes to gleaning the architecture, including use of structure, character of materials, existing ensemble and elements, skin and environment. There are also moments I glean from historical activity and physical elements that I reuse, such as the pulp pools built in concrete and paved with tile, placed next to the machine head box. They represented water circulation, flow of materials in paper production. They are poetic and significant, and they are now where people circulate in the library.

Yes, the new program is a library. It was a paper factory and used to store tons of paper. Now they still do.

Next phase

I am very greedy to keep everything, value everything, and display every orthodox corner or strange piece of my discovery. I am also very aware of the ugliness and beauty of the existing, but I still find it very hard to convince people in my graphics, especially when I try to combine research products with the design products. It seems that I haven't found a continuous graphical language to connect all the flowing minds and layers. This would really be my next big task to test out different illustrative method or different forms of products.

Also to mention, my all architectural drawings, especially building technology parts could be much improved and revised. A balance between accuracy and filtered information should be taken into consideration.

In the process, I realize a lot of my design decisions were very intuitive, came naturally from the back of my head. They needed to be tested in physical models, also in the stories I built from the existing. I need to diagnose them, pin them down and write them down. I focus a lot on the corners, now it's time to jump out and look at it as a whole.

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