

# AN INTERIM SECOND-LIFE IN THE UNSTABLE CITY.

A reflection on the typological and praxeological research on the adaptive reuse of industrial buildings.

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Thesis "Embracing the Fragmented City"

## I INTRODUCTION

The relevance between research-methodology and design practices in the realm of architecture is rarely discussed in the architectural education of TU Delft. The different tools and techniques that help one obtain information out of research were considered self-evident during the studies. However, the philosophy behind the preferred research method that comes with an own set of tools and techniques was lacking and caused the methodology to be overlooked. Unlike at the Architectural Research Unit (ARU), which is a design studio at London Metropolitan University, where they believe that the research phase is as important for the design as the design phase itself<sup>1</sup>. Instead of determining research methods while aiming for the acquirement of specific and desirable information as preparation before the design phase, I simply perceived architectural research rather as a generic base to start a design. This course proved the contrary and showed me the concern of having different methods in architectural research. Thereby, this course forced me to rethink the steps I made, sometimes intuitively, during the thesis, which helped me to judge critically on the process of researching. Due to the parallel program of this course and the graduation studio, this realization resulted in awareness, more than a useful implementation. This stresses the relevancy of research-methodology as preparation for designing and therefore the influence of the chair of Methods and Analysis that comes with this course would have been more beneficial for the graduation studio in an earlier phase.

The thesis topic derived from the assigned research theme 'Unstable City'<sup>2</sup> in the context of municipality Anderlecht in Brussels. Within this theme, I perceived instability as inevitable and a natural process in the city. Therefore, the attitude towards this was to find a way how to deal with instability instead of aiming for stability. Since this theme can be widely interpreted in many aspects of the city, this research is framed on the topic of vacancy and thus the underutilization of spaces in the city.

The graduation studio proposed a dual thesis, whereby the outcomes of the two separate researches are respectively exhibited during the P1 and P2. The first part of the dual thesis concentrates on the second life of industrial buildings in the neighborhood of Anderlecht called Cureghem. The sequel part focusses on how the current underused public spaces can be transformed in meaningful places for the same neighborhood. The research is developed through the lens of finding qualities and chances within architectural and urban instability and discovering an approach to this phenomenon.

In the context of the chair's approach<sup>3</sup> the topic of vacancy is relevant, not only because vacant spaces take part in the urban plan, but also because secondary effects of vacancy are perceptible on many scales in the city. Vacant spaces offer possibilities where new private, public and collective spheres can be unlocked in existing structures and surroundings.

The main question that arises from the studio's subject 'Spolia'<sup>4</sup> is 'what to keep?'. In that sense, vacancy is a significant topic that provides this main question with challenges by rethinking the existing building stock and practicing adaptive reuse.

In both parts of the thesis, the social role made an important appearance. In the first part, a closer look is taken at the altered program and associated human appropriation in the same buildings,

<sup>1</sup> Formerly supervised by Florian Beigel and Philip Christou: <http://aru.londonmet.ac.uk/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> An Unstable City constantly deals with (unexpectedly or unpredictable) change that one can interpret as a form of uncertainty in the urban environment. However, simultaneously, the Unstable City offers spaces of exploration to put flexibility, temporality and dynamics in architecture into practice (Crawford, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> "Architecture is not seen as a craft of filling in blanks within an urban plan, (...) designing a building always means creating and influencing the surrounding environment. It is about critically reading and assessing a given situation, in order to either complete or re-direct it by adding a building. Urban Architecture focuses on the position of the building relative to existing structures" as cited from <https://www.tudelft.nl/onderwijs/opleidingen/masters/aubs/msc-architecture-urbanism-and-building-sciences/master-tracks/architecture/programme/studios/urban-architecture/>

<sup>4</sup> A term from archaeology, spolia are the left-overs or 'spoils' of a building, which find themselves back in a new structure.

whilst in the second part, the focal point is on researching human interaction in urban voids as a cure for the empty lots.

## II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Since the thesis is built up from two different researches, diverse sets of research methods are engaged. However, for this paper solely the approach and the corroborating research methods of the first part on the second-life of industrial buildings will be addressed. With this conscious decision, I hope to come to a more detailed and fruitful reflection for this assignment.

The industrial buildings in the studied area are depreciated and waiting for demolition<sup>5</sup>. Hence, the adaptive reuse is implemented by means of interim use<sup>6</sup>. In the process of answering the question 'what to keep?' the research serves as a reaction to the future area development plans. To get a grip on the spatial opportunities that the buildings are offering, an approach of typological research method is adopted to acquire architectural knowledge on adaptive reuse. To subsequently embed this information in the present day and therefore to make sense of the typological research after the buildings have been repurposed, the research continues in the framework of praxeology.

Thus, this holistic research allows a close reading of industrial buildings' origin and development, the characteristics of their productive spaces and their former and current occupation by people.

The heuristic tools, that are used for the typological research method, consist of analyzing historical maps between 1930 and 2019 of the area to understand how the morphology, which holds these 'types' in the urban fabric, evolved. Afterward, these developments are linked parallel to the change of ownership and program in a timeline, of which the data is obtained through browsing the internet for newspapers, public documents as found in the database of bankruptcies in Belgium and speaking with the current tenants and users. This latter occurred during the fieldwork. This employed heuristic technique also contributed to the examination of the four specific industrial buildings on their spatial qualities in the form of comparative case studies. These results were documented in the analytical diagramming of the buildings' plan to simplify and categorize the new program and in photography to archive the new spaces as a catalog. It was of more importance to discover the buildings on-site instead beyond the text and given drawings of the plans in order to determine the iterative characteristics of the productive spaces as endorsed by Lucas (2015, p.43). He states that practice-based research allows one to think differently about research and to recognize the discipline on its terms. Moreover, praxeology is also carried out during fieldwork. At this moment, the existing structures find their connection with the human appropriation of the spaces, interpreted in a new way.

This set of research methods found its end at the P1, when the results needed to be converted in products for an exhibition. I consider this process as a separate architectural heuristic as well, namely the heuristic of communication. Hernández (2018, p. 93), who did the first talk of this course on heuristics, explains in his dissertation that the codification of the information acquired from, and used to define the built environment constitutes the communicative heuristic. In other words, a way of communicating architectural knowledge. The instrument I used to communicate the architectural knowledge during the exhibition is a diptych<sup>7</sup> and the method consists of visual layering whereby the existing structures and the change of program with the associated human appropriation

<sup>5</sup> Confirmed by the local newspaper and project developer Citydev.Brussel:

<https://www.hln.be/in-de-buurt/brussel/citygate-ii-wordt-een-nieuwe-duurzame-stadswijk-in-anderlecht~ad426d31/>  
<https://www.citydev.brussels/nl/projects/citygate>

<sup>6</sup> Finding temporary tenants for this interim period is outsourced to Entrakt b.v., a company specialized in the management of empty buildings.

<sup>7</sup> This is a two-dimensional graphic work with two images, which are related to each other formally and/or substantively by a distinct "hinge".

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of the spaces are distilled. The “hinge”, that relates these two images with each other, took the form of adaptive reuse.



### III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Qualitative research helps one simply to explore and understand the qualities. The categorization of facts is often based on individual or group perspectives. Therefore, this method is rather understood as subjective than absolute understandings (Lucas, 2015, p. 36). One that is used to this latter could experience qualitative research as uncertain and insufficiently accurate. However, for involving social aspects to architecture it can work well, I will come to this later.

The subjectivity of qualitative research is what I have detected during my research. When observing the productive spaces, indoor as well as outdoor, it demanded an interpretational view on whether the traits of industrial typology that were discovered are considered as a quality or not.

Moreover, the strategy of qualitative research is one of first-hand encounters with a specific and defined context (Groat&Wang, 2013, p. 222). So, the mistake of generalizing the qualities of industrial buildings' characteristics is easy to be made. I was aware of the fact that the results on the

qualities were only regarding these specific cases in Anderlecht since it involved people of Brussels in real-world situations and how they “made sense” of their environment.

To challenge myself on being critical about this subjectivity and to argue my aim for a holistic approach, I will now reflect my research on the methodology.

Typology can be described as the system of knowledge pertaining to the logic of the ‘type’ as an element categorized on characteristic traits (Gorny, 2019). Looking at the history of typological research Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy and Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand both played an important role in the development of this method and thereby defining the ‘type’. Quatremère defines the concept of type as the reason behind architecture, that has established a deep connection with the past (Moneo, 1978, p. 28). Unlike Quatremère, Durand took a different approach by avoiding the idea of ‘type’ and he used the word ‘genre’ instead. With ‘genre’ Durand meant a classification of buildings according to their program or use (Moneo, 1978, p. 29). He is known for using plans and elevations in his books to show these similarities. Also, Gorny (2019) points out the use of plans or axonometric drawings as a way to demonstrate the investigated objects or elements that define the ‘type’.

Case studies are used as an important way to study precedents in architectural design, partly because this method allows for categorizing and identifying the type (Groat&Wang, 2013). Regarding my research, I have used plans as a way of classifying the buildings’ program and use. However, taking four case studies on the grounds of their shared original productive function could be disputed. I have noticed that buildings with (former) industrial purpose as a ‘genre’ of typology is broad. They differ in building period, scale and type of production. Therefore, the search for iterative characteristics of the productive spaces that applies to all case studies was difficult. It was because of this, that the subjectivity hinted and only a selection of certain qualities was elaborated. I was inspired by Vacant NL<sup>8</sup> to explore the power of affordances and to analyze typologies to find these traits’ qualities. However, in his research, the affordances went beyond the spatial aspect of typologies (Rietveld, 2014). He also included the maximum construction height and noise, expressed in decibels before it was considered as nuisance. Another example is the distance until an institute of knowledge. All this, to find potential new purposes for the buildings.

Praxeology is a study about human actions, where the built environment serves as the stage for everyday practice and the researchers are often observers as well (Berkers, 2019). Praxeology helps one to comprehend the interaction between people and spaces. To be more specific on the contribution of praxeology in terms of social aspect, I would like to mention a quotation of Berkers<sup>9</sup>:

“Studying the praxis of architecture one can develop an eye for the actual users of building, and not the imagined one”

With this being said, I could relate the relevancy of praxeology to my research topic of adaptive reuse to a certain extent. My interpretation lies in the fact the actual users are the imagined ones when it comes to the new program, but these users are far from what the architect imagined the spaces to be for. Fieldwork was required to observe the appropriation of space by the new program and users.

French social philosopher Alfred Espinas gave the term praxeology its modern meaning in 1890<sup>10</sup>. Despite that this was in the field of economy, the study of praxeology gradually developed into several disciplines and they share similar beliefs. According to Rothbard (1976), the belief is that opposed to reflexive behavior, humans engage purposeful behavior, and it is the logic of action and deed. Scott (2012) refers to Ludwig von Mises, who continues by explaining that in praxeology, under the scope of economy, action and reason are congeneric and homogeneous. She quotes Mises: “That reason has the power to make clear through ratiocination the essential features of action is a

<sup>8</sup> An art installation by Ronald Rietveld, co-founder of RAAAF, for the Venice Biennale 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Lecture Talk 2: Investigating Spatial and Social Practices by Marieke Berkers

<sup>10</sup> The study was developed independently by two principal groups: the Austrian school, in which a praxeological approach was developed by Ludwig von Mises, and the Polish school created by Tadeusz Kotarbiński

consequence of the fact that action is an offshoot of reason (Scott, 2012, p. 199). If human behavior is considered as objective and universal and one can assume that people engage in intentioned behaviors suggested that they have preferences, then observing human behavior on appropriation in adaptive reused spaces can be fruitful.

Diptychs, that originated in the Roman and Byzantine times, introduce a visualization and reflection on the meaning of components presenting in the pictures. John Bernhard enhances the meaning of the images' interplay, that often produces ambiguous feelings<sup>11</sup>. When it comes to education, diptychs have been considered as a tool at Yale School of Architecture. Visiting professor Peter Eisenman guided a course in 2015 called Diagrammatic Analysis<sup>12</sup>. I used this tool of communication in a similar way to challenge the viewer in an interactive way by adding a transparent layer, but also to invite the viewer to establish a personal connection through the subtle pairing.

#### IV POSITIONING

With my interests in adaptive reuse as an interim period in the neighborhood of Cureghem in Brussels, Marieke Berkers' lecture on investigating Spatial and Social Practices and Robert Alexander Gorny on investigating Typologies proved to be the most enlightening when considering my own position.

The talk of Marieke Berkers encouraged me to think about the needs of the real users of an architectural scene. Vacant or not; many architects, planners, and municipalities try with great intention to introduce dominated intervention in the city, if not demolishing large areas to start over, thereby hoping to combat the Unstable City. The same applies to impose specific new functions and ways of using them. It was this lecture in combination with the provided text of Tom Avermaete, titled *The Architect and the Public: Empowering People in Postwar Architecture*, that made me realize about the new relationship between the architect and the public. By involving in the public into the whole design process, several positions of the architect emerge (Avermaete, 2010). A more coordinate role of the architects can result in returning the rights to the user for governing their own city, or as Henri Lefebvre has put it: "right to the city"<sup>13</sup>. Communicating the social role of architecture to the public realm and intervene in daily life is an idea that I can relate with. The idea behind the research on adaptive reuse is to make meaningful places for other people out of these underutilized spaces. The existing structures in the area of Anderlecht is what I perceive as the *Spolia* or valuable affordances. This position balances between the role of architect as an activist, fighting for spatial justice, and as a facilitator, who engages people in the realization of the project (Avermaete, 2010, p. 48). It is a way for me to use my professional skills to represent a disempowered community and resist oppressive forces of the future area development plans.

Landau (1981, p. 112) stated that "architects hold a great variety of belief systems which they use in the production of their architecture and which are expressed in different ways." Opposed to the rationalists, the architects with an empiric approach are less explicit about their belief. However, this does not mean that their belief system is missing. On the contrary, an important operational rule of theirs is the necessity to be open to influences from surroundings, to yet inexplicable intuitions and the results of experiments (Landau, 1981). All this results in directives, which provide you the freedom of creating that a set of predetermined rules would not.

Looking back at my research methods and approach, I would place myself more towards empiricism on this polarized spectrum. At the beginning of this paper, I explained my attitude towards the Unstable City as an inevitable and natural process in the city. Instead of aiming for stability, I am driven to deal with instability in a curative way. I aspired to let myself surprise by the context of

<sup>11</sup> John Bernhard is a Swiss American photographer and devoted his book 'Diptych' to this visual communication.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.architecture.yale.edu/courses/23816-diagrammatic-analysis-the-diptych-as-a-topological-diagram>

<sup>13</sup> Henri Lefebvre elaborates this topic in his book *Writings on cities* (1996)

Anderlecht. With this belief, I have discovered many fruitful things I may have overlooked if I would strive for a hardcore, rationalistic concept. I am motivated by the people and therefore, I see the importance of listening, observing, deliberating with them. However, the subjectivity of one architect's perspective is a critical point that requires attention when it comes to decision-making in design. This is surely something that one needs to be aware of and for this, reflecting on the research methodology has a great contribution to architectural research.

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