

Reflection Paper

David Fang

4481739

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My graduation project 'Along/Crossin the Edges' explored the edge conditions of the Maastricht waterfronts. The Sappi factory terrain, our site of focus, is an industrial site which lies close to the city center. However, as the industry became less active, it has become an isolated place that has turned its back to the city and the water. The project aims, therefore, to re-establish the connection between the city and the factory terrain through the revival of the Bassin, a former industrial inner harbour. The design is initiated by a series of research, including collaborative research and individual research, which have mainly taken the form of fieldworks.

My approach to the project is strongly influenced by the theme of the studio "Glaneur, Glaneuses". As the first assignment of the studio, we were asked to make a small design which incorporate the notion of 'gleaning'. It has initiated an inspiring collective discussion and reflection on the theme of 'gleaning'. I have made a side table from gleaned ventilation cases and wooden pieces. It has made me to reflect on the essence of gleaning: Is it to respect the quality of the existing, or to make use of the existing and transform it according to the desire of the designer? Despite the raising of the question, it has not been explicitly answered in the subsequent process of the project.

'Gleaning', as a research approach, has been further comprehended through a collaborative research. With four fellow students, we have studied the phenomenon of migrants in Maastricht through the investigation of three case studies, in the form of measured drawings, models, photographs, auto-photographs, videos, interviews and cognitive maps. The detailed measured drawing sets is a summary of our observation and findings. We have concluded that the migrants, as new comers in the city, would appropriate spaces to make them feeling at home. These appropriation could be interior installations, food or products, or even a small object on the shelf. Through this collaborative research, we have learned the strength of 'gleaning' as a research tool. It is about to get your hand dirty, to take the context with great care and to allow the incidents happen. After this phase of research, we all have brought something with us into the following process of the project, despite the fact that this collaborative research is not directly relevant to the site of the design project.

I was fascinated by the interaction between the human and the edge during the first phase of the research. However, this fascination has not directly helped to formulate my individual research. Before settled on the theme 'human activities and the waterfront', I have been wondered around topics including 'consumerism', 'As found' and Maastricht as a ceramique city. After setting the focus of the research, I have still been questioning the choice of waterfront. This has become more clear as I started to study the waterfront by collecting archival materials and documenting the waterfront by myself. Water appeared to be an prominent element to Maastricht. It has carried the history of Maastricht, a city that transformed from a fortified city to an industrial city.

In the phase of urban proposal, with two fellow students, we have made an attempt to incorporate all of our interest into the proposal. At the time I have not yet realized the essence of my research topic, which is the interaction between the human and the edge, with waterfront being the context and the scope of the research. As a result, many importance was given to water as a design element. Our initial urban proposal has utilize water aiming to create a resilient and porous site. The proposed water system has been criticized as being too symbolic and fragmented. We have then simplified our proposal into the introduction of a new canal that creates an island, isolated from the rest of the Sappi terrain. This seemed to be a working proposal before we realized that a five meter deep canal has little value added to the site. Based on this urban proposal, I have proposed an initial architectural idea involving a completely controlled and planned out building complex. One important comment I have received on this proposal

was that instead of gleaning the edges, it seems that I was cleaning the edge. All the informalities have been removed from the existing, and they were replaced them with formal spaces under control.

This was the moment when I have looked at my project again with the lens of 'gleaning': what am I gleaning as a designer? Our urban proposals have been focusing on the introduction of new water systems, while the site is already surrounded by different bodies of water. With 'gleaning' in mind, I have decided to withdraw from the previous proposals and take a careful look at the existing. The site I have chosen is currently a parking lot, therefore leaving quite a lot space and freedom for the insertion of new building volumes. However, there are constraints formed by the existing. The parking lot was bounded by the Affuitenloods, an elongated building to storage canons; the Maasboulevard, an elevated road bridging across the Bassin; and the Bassin. The parking lot itself is located on a slope which bridges a height difference of over three meters. The site, therefore, has many element that could be accessed. During the reuse workshop led by Renaud Haerlingen from ROTOR, the Maasboulevard has been addressed as an object that prolongs the walking distance across the area, while also splitting the Bassin into two parts. This has initiated, on the other hand, an discussion over the potential of the Maasboulevard. One of the qualities of a gleaner is the ability to accept the existence of things. Maasboulevard may be considered as an problematic object in its current context, but it could become an unique place in the city under proper intervention. This idea has greatly influenced my approach to the existing and to my project as a whole.

Another important moment which has inspired mine design and research process was the walk along the Maas riverfront. As a comment to the P2 presentation, I was suggested to do a long distance walk along the waterfront, to extend the scope of the research. I spent a day walking from the northern border to the southern border between Maastricht and Belgium, with a fresh mind ready to be surprised. The main discovery from this walk was the observation of informal spaces that are being appropriated and private spaces that are being controlled by fences and gates. These places, mainly lying on the outskirts of the city, has formed a contrast to the waterfront spaces in the city center, which are mostly controlled public spaces. These findings on the phenomenons of the informal and the formal, the private and the public has added new ingredients into my design thoughts. However, as I reflect on my current design, these elements has not been the main driven force in the design, or even worse, they have little influences on the design decisions I have made. A reason for this might be the eagerness to rush to the next stage of design, instead of trying to design public space(s) that could invite the act of appropriation. It has stayed as an implicit goal which has not been achieved yet by the current design.

A tendency to have an overall control of the project has limited the flexibility of the project at certain moments in the design process. For instance, the introduction of many height differences inside the building, a kayak workshop space with columns in the middle, the small window openings for changing rooms. These all constraint the potential adaptation that might take place in the future. A designer with the approach of gleaning differs from a traditional gleaner. A gleaner collects and select from what they found, while a designer should also consider what their design could leave to be gleaned by others.

When the design proceed into the phase of materialization and designing the facade, I have fallen into another round of struggle. I have been hesitated in between numerous of options, including a combination of concrete and timber, brick and timber, and only timber. As I look back, a reason that might caused this is that, for another time, I have lifted the project from its context. The building loses the connection with its surroundings and there is nothing for it to grasp on or glean from.

The choice of reusing the concrete beams from the Maasboulevard bridge is a turning point in the materialization concept of the project. The reusing of these concrete beams have saved them from being disposed, while also introducing specificity into the project. Nevertheless, as a compensation to this reuse, a secondary timber structure has to be constructed on top for the volume above it, since no columns could be placed underneath the middle of the pre-stressed concrete beams. This act of gleaning could be further reflected from the economical perspective, whether the effort of this form of reuse is worthy.

The research that I have conducted have certainly resulted in ingredients for the design. However, some have stayed implicitly throughout the design process, and some have not been considered seriously enough to be transformed into architectural ideas. Even though sketch has been my major design tool that helps me to visualize and test the design ideas, it does not always make my design ideas explicit. This could have been improved by exchanging ideas with fellow students in the studio. Our studio has a relaxed atmosphere. Everyone is opened up for talks and to inspire each other. I think that I have not used this collaborative attitude fully to my advantage. Furthermore, a difference between the collaboration research before P1 and the group work for urban proposal could be reflected. Within the collaboration research group, ideas are mostly fully exchanged. The group has also benefited from the strength of each individual. The collaboration between the urban group, in comparison, seems a bit more fragmented. Even though we are always able to agree on one decision in the end, it was not as smooth.

As mentioned above, there are things that I have not yet achieved with my project. The most crucial part would be the architectural translation of the research. Another part which I would still want to work on is to further explore the potential of wood as a material, in relation to the concept of the project. Therefore, the period during P4 and P5 will be the moment that I will be make a further step and make my project more complete.