

REFLECTION

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00.ABSTRACT

The theme of the academic year of the studio Interiors Building Cities is the "Intimate City". This topic has placed the students in front of the relationship between architecture and social experiences. These experiences, these relationships, often take place in the so-called Public Interiors, places that are used as public spaces even if they could belong to a private owner. Hospitals, libraries or shopping centres are some examples. However, within the concept of public interior are also public property spaces such as arcades, passageways and inner courtyards, as well as public outdoor public areas that provide shelter as bus shelters. Kristiaan Borret, Belgian architect and professor, defines these phenomena as "secondary public spaces", differentiating them from the so-called "primary public spaces" (streets, alleys and squares). While the study and development of primary public spaces have long been a central element of research for city planning, on the other hand, the attention about secondary public spaces have often been subjected to speculative and commercial dynamics. My thesis project, developed in Antwerp in a former industrial warehouse for the storage of coffee and tobacco, seeks precisely to define the term "Intimacy" through the design of those "secondary public spaces", those Public Interiors, crucial for the creation of physical and social connectivity and cohesion in the urban structure.

01.INTRODUCTION

Leveraging industrial heritage contributes to the success of re-purposed industrial areas. This is also the case for the former Antwerp goods station district (now Spoor North Park) located in the north of the city, nearby the historic port. In particular, walking through the streets of the neighbourhood I discovered an old warehouse, which is now owned by the company Katoen Natie, used largely as a car park and only minimally as a warehouse by the company itself.

Historically, the neighbourhood played a crucial role in connecting the old city fabric of Antwerp to the newly developed areas of the city. Nevertheless, this historical spine of the city gradually lost its spatial and cultural importance for the general public, especially in the past 30 years due to the dismantling of the merchant railway station and a lack of public domain.

The fact that the warehouse is privately owned allows me to trace the distinction between formal property and mental property. In fact, both public and private parties can own a public interior; for it to be perceived as a public space, mental ownership must lie with users. The growing conjunction between the concepts of "public" and "internal" highlights the complex relationship between urban and internal conditions. The phenomena related to interior space can be seen as having a direct impact on the urban environment. The opposite is also true: the urban scale clearly influences the design of the interior space. The evolution within the discipline of interior architecture also underlines the concept of internal public: a field that once focused almost the design of private spaces is now concerned with the relational conditions between inside and outside.

Furthermore the theme of the property has a rate with accessibility. Public accessibility has a central role in the development of my project as it is synonymous with permeability: being able to enter a space without hesitation or effort. However, the accessibility of an internal public can be limited in time for practical reasons. Accessibility and property define what I mean by the word "public" in my research.

02.RESEARCH & METHODOLOGY

The central question of my design project is therefore:

To what extent the design of Katoen Natie Foundation would contribute to activate the historical spine of Amandus Atheneum-Spoor North park, and create a new public domain that would blur the physical and mental boundaries between the historic city centre and the newly developed areas of Antwerp?

To be able to answer this, I need to understand few key aspects:

- Why does the project area is so crucial for the city?
- What has been done? And what is the relationship to the project area?
- How can Architecture play a role in reconstructing the identity of the site?

In this view, I will look at the selected location and the development of Antwerpen from three distinct points of view:

- From Historical and Spatial
- From Socio and Cultural
- From Political Economic

02.1.HISTORICAL AND SPATIAL

In the 19th century, the city of Antwerp underwent many changes. The industrial port activities flourished and the old city walls were demolished. The harbour evolved into a transshipment port, with the construction of many warehouses in the goods station district as a consequence. The harbour traffic of goods increased substantially and the harbour infrastructure, the railway network and the overall storage capacity proved to be insufficient

Therefore, it was decided to construct a new goods station in 1874, located between the newly constructed docks and the new district built on the former location of the old city wall. Warehouses established themselves in this district, which became the new goods station district. The goods that arrived by ship were stored in these warehouses before further transportation by train, and vice versa.

The new district near the port and near the new goods station was very attractive for nations and traders who constructed large scale warehouses in the area (as shown in this slide). *Katoen Natie* was one of the first nation that expanded beyond the old city area.

At the end of the 20th century, the character of the district changed dramatically. The port had moved again northwards as a consequence of the increase of production and the technical

developments in the shipping and oil industry. The district was hit by social unrest and deprivation as a consequence of the lack of socioeconomic opportunities.

Indeed this allows me to reveal some underlying ideas regarding the development of the city from the Political Economic point of view.

02.2.POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC

It is clear how the district is located in a privileged area of the city. In fact, it played a crucial role as the connection area in the conjunction of not only the historical city center and the new development areas to the north, but also between these two and the Spoor North Park.

Indeed due to the high number of traders wishing to invest in the area, in 2012, the City of Antwerp published the RUP (*Ruimtelijk UitvoeringsPlan*) 2060 for Antwerp-North in order to protect the interests and the identity of the neighbourhood. This plan identifies the needs and shortcomings of the area.

These triggered me to investigate the development of the area from the socio and cultural point of view.

02.3.SOCIO CULTURAL

After the dismantling of the railway station, the area has been transformed by the project of Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò into a large park.

Nowadays a park is a «social space», a place for many everyday activities, a city part that can specially contribute to give a clear structure to the whole city.

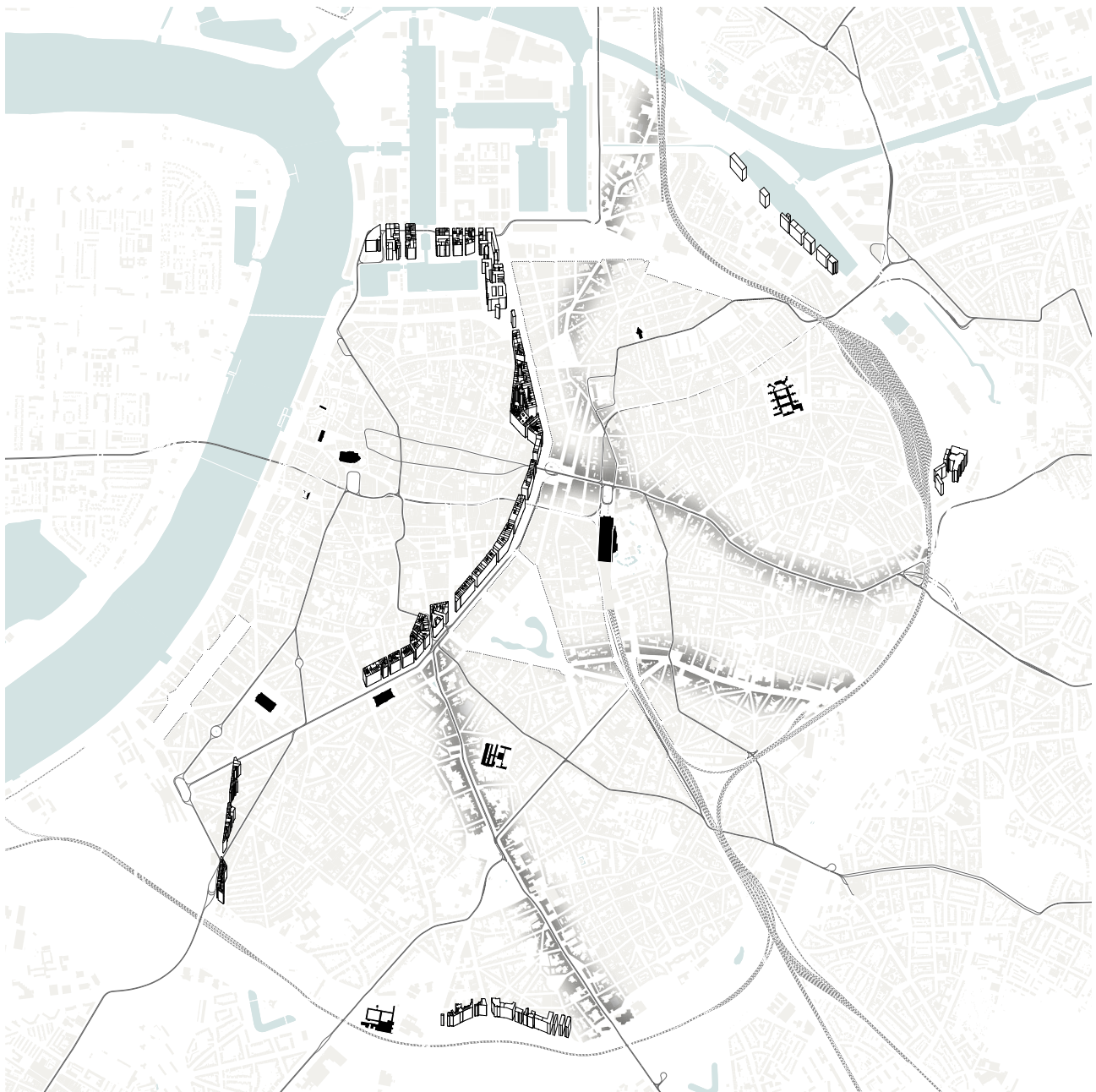
Let me now compare the station system when it was still working with the activities that have been developed today in order to reinforce my idea.



As it can be seen from the image of the twentieth century, the station was composed of different parts. From left to right, in fact, it can be recognised the Hanseatic House, the Felix warehouse, for the storage of loose goods such as coffee, cereals, cheese and tobacco. The Royal Warehouse. And then the head station with the Katoen Natie warehouse. Further east the SPTM, where traction

equipment was positioned. Finally, the WDT or a repair shop for damaged parts. Each element collaborate to the perfect functioning of the system, exactly like an engine.

Nowadays the situation is slightly different. Indeed, there is a Sport center at the very east part. Only the supporting structure has been left of the old SPTM repair shop. Today the structure is used as a temporary refreshment area and small events. Some students houses and a high school campus has been built instead of the station. The royal warehouse has been replaced with offices. The Felix warehouse has been renovated installing an Archive and the MAS museum has been built replacing the Hanseatic House.



I have sum-up my analysis with all the reflections I have developed with this drawing. Some of the transformations that have taken place over the centuries are still shaping the perception of some part of the city. The old Spanish wall enclosure has left a strong trace. The buildings that have sprung up in its place in fact still divide the city. The passage of the ancient entrances to the city still allow quick access to it. I have been focused deeply on the urban analysis because, more and more during the past months I have understood that phenomena related to interiors spaces can be seen to have a direct impact upon the urban environment and vice versa.

What I have studied and learned from my analysis bring my thoughts to a quote from Walter Benjamin about a paint of Paul Klee entitled "Angelus Novus".

The angel has the face turned towards the past but is pushed by the wind of paradise that is not able to fight leading it towards the future. The approach I developed in the project is precisely that of not betraying the identity of the building, the past, but looking at the new dynamics for a future develop.

03.DESIGN

Katoen Natie, founded in 1854 in Antwerp, is a leading provider of logistics services, specialising in the transport, management and conservation of art collections for museums, government departments, local authorities and private collectors, which operates worldwide. Katoen Natie has, also for this reason, a particular attention for art and artistic heritage in general, holding one of the largest collections of Belgian textiles.

My project aims to combine textile design, art, fashion, industrial heritage and innovation in a dynamic and creative work museum located in the former warehouse owned by the company on Ellermanstraat in Antwerp. A center of knowledge and competence for textile products: a lively and creative meeting place where visitors and local users can enjoy exhibitions and take part in educational programs, experiments and expert meetings. The will of the Foundation also aims to actively involve the community in which the project fits in, offering tasks of various kinds, from safety to maintenance.

The project is developed through a series of functions (Cafe, Museum, Library, Textile Laboratory and Textile / Book Shop) that are grafted onto the ancient covered street inside the warehouse. The Passage presents itself with a strong character of public interior, a stage for many casual encounters. Architecture (interior) and planning also meet here. The passage as a public interior defined by the intimate relationship of three actors: bodies, objects and spaces. In this way an infrastructure system immediately emerges where the entry transition and the intimacy gradient are relevant for the connection of different types of public, semi-public or private spaces. Revenue is a crucial element in shaping the (gradual) transition between the outside world and internal (semi) private spaces.

The decision to work with an existing abandoned building stems from a problem present within the city. Antwerp is described as a "porous city" an image used to interpret the dynamics and transformations that are taking place in the urban fabric.

It is interesting to underline the different levels on which the porosity is recognised. On the one hand, it is a condition referable to the large industrial areas. It is caused by the slow but inexorable port activities' shift towards the areas in the north of the dock. On the other hand, porosity refers to minute changes within individual lots previously abandoned. The strategic reflection used by Secchi and Viganò reflects on "a new possibility of the urban tissue to be interpreted" despite the abandonment process. At different levels the porosity expresses the ability to absorb changes and different practices, individual and collective, acknowledging the role of the individual transformations in the space and asking how the current fragmented changes can be reinterpreted in a new collective project.