

REFLECTION PAPER

Urban Architecture Graduation Studio Bricolage

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1| Motivation. The Chair of Urban Architecture highlights urban conditions that are looking for a new position and inclusion within the city. The choice of the studio is related to its theoretical comprehension of the urban fabric and its pragmatic approach in a specific site. The *modus operandi* of the Chair consists in a valuable opportunity and training for the practice world. The sensitive and concrete approach towards design is reflected in the selection of the project site and the chance to investigate it in person. The sites are usually in Belgium and The Netherlands where tutors can really convey their personal and professional experience and knowledge.

The topic of the studio, Bricolage, is a sensitive approach that consists in a *fil rouge* during the entire process of research and design. The Studio *Bricolage* focuses on the figure of the *Architect-Bricoleur* who is described as an organizer who re-creates a context with the means that come to hand. The site-specific nature of the course resonates with the idea of Bricolage as a process that starts with the art of seeing things and looking for hidden opportunities.

2| Research and design. The first action is the comprehension of the existing urban fabric. The *Architect-Bricoleur* does not apply a personal fascination to the urban condition in analysis but tries to make the site itself the protagonist of the entire investigation. For this reason, it is not possible to define a phase of research followed by a phase of design since they established a syntonous relation during the entire year. The research consists in the connecting element through different scales of analysis and intervention (the mall, the people, the city, ecology, and the materiality) from the beginning to the end of the thesis.

3| The site. The investigation started with the social and physical analysis of the city organised in two processes. The social analysis is a collective work which consists of a series of interviews with more than 70 inhabitants of Nijmegen about their stories, lives, and connections. The social investigation explored a methodology of *impromptu* qualitative research since the interviewees were spontaneously approached in different areas of the city. The set of interviews creates a picture of the city as a multiplicity of perspectives.

The site analysis is an individual investigation that underlines the weakness and the potential of the mall within the urban fabric. The area is located in Nijmegen, a Dutch middle-size city on the border between The Netherlands and Germany. The site project consists in an obsolete shopping passage completely out of scale in comparison with the built context. With a footprint of 10'000 m², the two-floors building connects three streets of the urban block and offers a parking lot on the roof. Besides the mono-functionality of the *Molenpoort*, connected exclusively with commercial activities, the building does not create a dialogue with the context in terms of typology. The mall is conceived as a series of rooms facing a central void that visually control the entire architecture.

4| Approach. In his publication "The city" (2004), M. Cacciari describes the contemporary city as a territory that is specializing without a general plan. The contemporary city is an indefinite, homogeneous space, a 'non-place'. As Cacciari (2004) says "the city is everywhere and therefore no longer a city". This logic is not present in the contemporary city, where same functions are spread homogeneously within the territory without a systematic process. Since these functions are everywhere, it is not possible to identify the city anymore. The concept of mall can be analysed following the statement of Cacciari (2004) "the city is everywhere and therefore no longer a city". If the condition of the city described from M. Cacciari is territorial, referred to the merging between city and region, the condition of the *Molenpoort* is typological. The mall does not have a specific identity nor establish a physical/social connection with the place since its typology can be applied everywhere.

The current municipal plan for the *Molenpoort* proposes the demolition of the mall and the design of smaller buildings in scale with the context. On the other hand, the thesis proposal is driven by an opposite intention which completely re-use the existing built environment. The purpose of the graduation project is to preserve the structure of the site and convert its critical issues into architectural and social values. The

process does not follow the gradual progression of scales from the city to the detail, but it consists in a continuous change of scales and lenses looking for an alternative posture towards the city.

5| Relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional, and scientific framework. The theme of the project faces a relevant issue from multiple perspectives and scales. The thesis intervenes in an obsolete mall, the tangible consequence of the failure of big departments store around the world. How can we re-think and integrate all these places within the current urban fabric? The scientific relevance of the proposal lies in the intention to preserve the existing heritage trying the maximalise the significance of the proposal while minimalizing the entity of the intervention.

6| Issues and dilemmas. The graduation thesis offered the chance to challenge my background and the tools acquired during the previous years.

The pivot moment of the thesis just after P2 when I decided to detach from the collective urban plan in order to carry out a more conservative and unitarian approach towards the existing. After P2, the most difficult challenge was to adapt the existing structure to a new function by maintaining the idea of one unitarian building that connects the three street fronts of the block. The building mainly develops horizontally without natural light. For this reason, the idea was to focus on the circulation and the light as the pivot elements of the entire intervention. In this way, the critical issues became the values of the proposal. The technical work in plan and section was fundamental to control the entire architectural organism.

Another difficult aspect of the process was the introduction of another function both within the building and above the parking roof that could stand harmoniously the enormous size of the plot.

To conclude, the Graduation Studio transmitted me the relevance and the potential of working with the existing heritage and encourage me to transform a weakness into a value with sensitiveness and consciousness.