

Werkplaats:
The Art of Adaptive Reuse

Reflection Paper

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The Urban Architecture Graduation Studio with the theme '*Low Town, Downtown*', is situated in Hoboken, a patchwork district in southern Antwerp, with an intertwined system of industry, nature, and social and middle-class housing. Our project takes us to the Blikfabriek, once an active industrial centre along the Lageweg, a busy commuting road, but today its 30,000 square meters of abandoned and deteriorating warehouses. Simultaneously, however, over the last decade, a community of artists has appropriated parts of the site, transforming it into an oasis for creatives and crafters, with studio spaces, workshops, all following a principle of make do and '*do-it-yourself*'. Taking this into account, the aim of my graduation project was to respond to these contrasting elements - a decaying industrial town and a blooming community of artists - by realizing *Werkplaats*: a cultural catalyst that houses a hybrid technical school and art academy, as well as a hub for the community.

Research

Initially, my research focused purely on the social aspects of the site. After visiting Hoboken and the Blikfabriek for the first time, my impression was that it was disconnected, underdeveloped and forgotten. After seeing a few teenagers and children hanging around the Blikfabriek with no real place to go, my initial focus became '*The Impact of Youth-Centred Architecture on Urban Renewal*'. During our visits to the site, I was always struck by the contrast between the Hoboken neighbourhood and the warm and vibrant sense of community at the Blikfabriek. I was inspired by this feeling and wanted to emulate it in my own project, and thus the idea of focusing specifically on cultural and educational buildings was born. For the submission of my research plan in November, this evolved into my initial research question: "*How can the integration of cultural and educational spaces in urban redevelopment projects foster a sense of community and a strong local identity in neglected neighbourhoods, while addressing the challenges of gentrification?*" However, as I continued my research, my interests took me more and more in the direction of architecture, specifically architectural reuse projects. Each time I visited the Blikfabriek, I was struck by the beauty of the warehouses, and while layman might see these dilapidated buildings as cold and uninviting spaces, I was always struck by the beauty and simultaneous delicacy and stature of these century-old factory buildings. Additionally, the influence of my P1 project, where we explored the theme of 'make do', and the masterplanning process, where we focused much of our preliminary research on the value of the local architecture, made me appreciate the existing even more. As a result, I decided to refocus my research on architecture and adaptive reuse.

After talks with my research tutor, Eireen, I decided to focus on a few specific adaptive reuse case study buildings. For my P2 presentation, I produced a '*Toolkit for Reuse*', in which I gathered and analysed many of the different tools used by the architects of my case study buildings, and categorized them into different themes: *Architectural intervention, Materiality & detailing, Historic identity, and User experience*. However, understandably, the feedback highlighted that my research was taking too much of a top-down approach, and I hadn't included enough of my personal opinions on the approach to reuse in each of the case studies. Moreover, I was encouraged by Eireen to be more courageous in my approach to research. Therefore, even though I knew it was not my strongest skill, I decided to take up drawing as a research method. I began making quick sketches of certain details that I appreciated in the buildings. This method greatly helped me to better understand each case study building, as it required of me to focus on very specific aspects of each building, staring at a complex corner where old and new intertwine for hours as I sketched. Through this process, I was constantly learning about all the different ways in which one can carry out reuse projects, not simply asking '*Should I preserve this wall?*' or not, but instead '*If I do decide to keep it, do I also preserve the crumbling century-old wallpaper, or do I strip it down?*' Overtime, this research developed into the thematization of the case studies. Analysing each building through the lens of a specific theme; *Domesticity, Spatial Transformation, and Mirroring*, allowed me to have a much more focused analysis.

Design

From the early stages of the design process, my aim was to create a space that feels dynamic, inviting, and inspiring. I wanted to introduce an innovative quality to the site, without overpowering its historical layers

and the character of its surroundings, remaining sensitive to the context of Hoboken. The social aspect of my research ultimately defined the site's program; a hybrid between a technical school and an extension of the Hoboken academy, with public spaces functioning as a community hub that encourages connection and a sense of belonging. My design process was a relatively smooth one. Early on I knew which of the site's existing buildings I wanted to work with, and my approach to the existing started out as a more sensitive and respectful one. However, this clashed somewhat with the expectations and requirements of a Master's graduation studio, and I began to wonder if I was being too cautious in my designs. With the feedback that I was being too apprehensive with my approach to the existing, I began to peel away at certain moments, revealing key moments in the building. I found that an alternative way of respecting the existing, was not solely to preserve everything, but instead to actually remove parts of it, to highlight a specific key moment in the building. This idea, together with the blurring of spaces between new and old, became a driving design tool. The most challenging part of the design process has been the central space between the two existing buildings, where I'm introducing a new '*monumental*' structure. Finding the right balance between blending in with what's there and creating something new and exciting has been a constant struggle over the past few months. However, through in-depth research into my case study buildings, I was able to better understand how other architects have approached similar tensions. This gave me the tools to experiment with proportions, materials and spatial transitions in a way that respected the existing context while allowing the new intervention to stand confidently on its own. In the end, this space became the heart of the project, both a connector and a statement.

Combining Research and Design

Throughout the development of my project, the integration of research and design gradually became more deliberate and meaningful. At the start, I found it challenging to translate my research into concrete design strategies as I had analysed three complex adaptive reuse projects, each with multiple approaches, and I struggled to break these down into clear principles that could guide my own design process. The turning point came when I began to thematise the case studies into three core concepts: *domesticity*, *spatial transformation*, and *mirroring*. Almost simultaneously, as I worked to redefine the key principles that shaped my design, I began to recognize a strong connection between these research themes and my own intentions. *I began to see my research in the design!* These three themes became a guiding framework that influenced the continuation of the project, such as in the choice of material and how to treat certain spaces. They helped clarify and reinforce certain design moments. The sketches and analytical drawings I produced during the research phase became tools to communicate and strengthen these ideas within the design. In this way, my research did not just inform the project, but it also became embedded in its architectural language.

Method

At the beginning of this project, I cast a wide net in terms of research methods. I was not sure which methods would be the most meaningful to me, so I planned to try everything: reading, filming, writing, interviews, site visits ect. I started with the intention to explore my research topic broadly. Naturally, overtime I found what worked better and was more relevant to the direction my research was taking me. I found that I worked best when I was physically present in spaces, whether in my own building, the Blikfabriek as a whole, or at the case study buildings I was analysing. Being in the spaces allowed me to feel the architecture, not just analyse it with a top-down approach. I paid attention to how people moved, where noise gathered, which corners felt intimate or overwhelming. I recorded these impressions through sketches, photos, and videos, and often wrote "diary entries" while sitting in the case study buildings, quick reflections on atmosphere, behaviour, and spatial sequences. This combination of observational and emotional documentation helped me understand the spaces not just as formal objects, but as lived environments. Sketching played a big role here as well. I would draw out ideas again and again, not with the aim of producing perfect visuals, but to understand spatial logic and composition. Alongside these site visits, I delved deep into archival documents, technical drawings, and floorplans.

One key moment that shaped my graduation project, came from the feedback on my P2 presentation. The feedback was that my approach to research and design was too pragmatic, which was a criticism at the time and, interestingly, a compliment in later design tutorials when I was told to *'lean into it'* at certain moments when my designs became too fragmented. Therefore, to be more courageous and playful in both my approach to research and design, became a constant reminder to myself.

Throughout the project, I began to see how my work could fit into a wider conversation about reuse and community-focused architecture. I became really interested in how old and new can coexist, how adding a sense of warmth and domesticity to large, empty industrial buildings can make them feel more welcoming and human. This feels relevant not only to my own site, but to many similar unused warehouse structures around the world. At the same time, I was always thinking about how to make the space socially meaningful, how it could bring life back to an underused part of the city and create space for learning, making and informal encounters. I wanted it to feel open and accessible. Still, I was very aware of the risks, especially in terms of gentrification. I kept asking myself who the project was really for and who might be excluded. My hope was to create a space that felt genuinely inclusive, not just polished or impressive, but lived in and shared.

Moving Forward

There's still some work to do in refining the detailing, atmosphere, and representation of my project, especially in how the spaces feel and connect at a more intimate level. In this final phase, I'll focus on strengthening the transitions between public and private, and clarifying how the spaces invite people in and guide them through. Some questions still remain around how the building will be used over time, and how adaptable it really is. Overall, this process has pushed me to be more courageous in how I treat existing architecture, and also to embrace the complexity of research and design working together.