

INTERIORS, BUILDINGS, CITIES

The Intimate City - Palazzo Rubens

P4 Reflection | Josephine Gebbie 4739450

| INTRODUCTION |

In 2017 the vlaamsbouwmeester held a competition concerning the future of the iconic Rubenshuis. The city of Antwerp wants to develop an innovative vision on the reception, the experience course and the operation of the museum. The competition brief asks the project to be "open, transparent, easily accessible, inviting, seductive, authentic, ... and to offers services that are personally experienced in contemporary, innovative and interactive ways." The Rubenshuis and the Rubenianum are sites that both have great heritage value and international appeal. However, the current facilities are no longer functional for contemporary demands. The sites are fractured and feel the need to reassess their urban condition. The goal of my project is to create a natural flow between the existing buildings and new additions, to join the Rubenianum with the Rubenshuis and its grounds, uniting the different functions of research and exhibition together into a whole 'Palazzo Rubens'. This 'Palazzo' will provide a space where the artistic and architectural heritage of Rubens and Antwerp can be celebrated and continued in a sustainable and creative way. The City Rooms within should invite each individual to dwell within the space, to intimately explore the 17th century life of Rubens and the Baroque movement at leisure. The project has demanded an intimate research and understanding of the existing heritage of the Rubenshuis, its urban development and existing physical, social and cultural condition. This has involved morphological and typological studies, literature studies and research of the material cultures involved in the Rubens site.

| DESIGN V.S RESEARCH |

The precedent study of the Rubenshuis, and the various methods of research entailed to develop a complete understanding and conclusion for the needs of the site and graduation project was key to developing the design narrative. Though this research came relatively late in the year scheme. The time up until the P1 was an interesting mix of research into the theme of the Intimate City and the notion of the City room in Paris, Milan, Vienna and Naples; this all then culminating in the design of a single City Room based off of conclusions made during the research phase. This linearity and directness of the relationship between design and research is something I have struggled with since the P1 with regards to the context of Antwerp and the narrative of the Rubens project. The handover period between the research seminar and studio design phases was I think handled poorly by the tutors with a plethora of different ambitions and goals being raised and tasks such as the Coupe Anatomique, Nolli map and group research of Antwerp coming to inconclusive ends. It would have been useful in our first investigations of Antwerp as a city to have had more concrete and present guidance. The process of selecting a site was very hectic and stressful for everyone, thankfully I was the only one to choose the Rubens Site and with the decision made to follow the competition brief I could move on into the research phase and questioning the outlines of the brief. This was a point at which I was a somewhat lost as how to continue with research of the context and site, which areas and methods I should be focusing on and in what order. In hindsight I spent too much time on inefficient research of the context without forcing myself to draw concrete conclusions from which I would be able to further my design. The repair period after my P2 was very valuable in this sense as I was able to respond to a specific set of research & design criteria set by my tutors in regards to the site and the theme of a City Room. I still have struggled to meaningfully integrate the material culture of Rubens and the Baroque period into my own design narrative, focusing too narrowly on the plans and the programmatic demands of the competition brief than the three dimensional spatial and material qualities of the project. I have learned that I need to become bolder in making conclusions and more assertive in my architectural ideas even if they are not yet fully formed, so that they can be refined through other methods of research and design and make the design process more efficient and to achieve faster progress. Despite the struggles I've had throughout the year to find a good balance and variety of workflow, it has been an enjoyable and highly educational project, allowing my interests in art and history to merge with the discipline of architecture in a more intimate way than in any of my previous projects. I am grateful to the advice and encouragement of my tutors throughout the research and design process; especially for reeling me back in when I have lost my way.

| THEME |

The project has, in a number of ways, worked closely with the year theme of the chair of Interiors, Buildings, Cities - that of the Intimate City, as well as the idea of a City Room. The theme highlights the collision of the public and private selves within the city, and the contexts in which this collision takes place. The Rubenshuis physically illustrates this blend of public and private life; the Flemish Gothic cottage formed the private home and the grand Baroque Italian Palazzo designed by Rubens that was the public face. These two wings were yoked together by an ingenious passageway that looks out through a courtyard enclosed by a Portico and into a lush garden beyond, ending at the Pavilion. This entrance space was design specifically to have a physical impact on any visitor, signifying Ruben's genius, wealth and power in one view. The various City Rooms within the existing complex provide great insight into the public life of 17th century Antwerp; the Kunst Kamer, the Atelier, the Baroque stairwell, courtyard and garden each relating some part of the larger narrative. The contemporary nature of the house as a museum also reflects a tension between public and private within the city. The project in its addition of various urban rooms (internal and external) connected by a network of passages and arcades opens the formerly paid-entry-only site to a wider public, encouraging interactions between locals and visitors, researchers and tourists. The creation of two new courtyards and smaller intermediate spaces allows for different individuals to see and be seen within the urban context.

| METHODOLOGY |

The primary research method has been an in-depth precedent study into the case of the Rubens house; this involved first a look at the historic morphological evolution of the site from its beginnings as a stand-alone cottage and fields on the edge of the medieval city to the complex urban context of the 21st century city block. Then a typological study of the Flemish cottage and the Italian palazzo alongside the city rooms within; such as the kunst Kamer and atelier. While the Italian Palazzo's of Genoa and Naples were of great interest it was the Hotel Particuliere typology of Paris that I believe truly influenced my urban interventions and felt more appropriate in the context of Antwerp where the Plantin Moretus Museum, Rockox House and Koninklijk Paleis provided local inspirations. A study of the renaissance gardens and courtyards helped to construct an extending narrative of a series of external city rooms and alcoves. The network of arcades that emerged in my earlier design has over time been refined and reduced through discussions with tutors so as to create a simple but powerful architectural gesture that respects and seeks to enhance the historic site. Material culture studies of the Rubenshuis has been helpful in the post P3 phase, though finding my own voice in response to that of Rubens has been and still is very challenging. Rubens' original

17th century design for a brick building with painted render trompe l'oeil facade for his atelier was later reconstructed as a natural stone relief during the restoration of the site in the 1940's; which technique does one then choose to design in response to? There is also the contemporary necessity for sustainable design to consider, it is not practical, nor necessarily desirable to build a massive loadbearing construction in today's climate. The interiors of the house also present a wealth of material inspiration, with the ceramic and marble tiles and leather wall paneling giving opportunities to extend the narrative of the private interior into the new spaces of the Reading Room and Visitors center. The materiality of the Interiors is still going to be a large part of the P5 phase and key to the success of the Project. In terms of design methods drawing and modelmaking have been key to testing my ideas, this has been particularly helpful in testing facade studies within the context by using printed paper models as a quick and easy way to go through many variations. This is something that I have been happy to discover in the P3 phase.

| SOCIAL CONTEXT |

The Rubens site (Rubens house, studio, porch, grave monument, pergola, gardener's house, arch gate and garden) is included in the established inventory of the architectural heritage of Antwerp and was protected as a monument by royal decree in 1936. The house and grounds were protected because of their art historical, historical and archaeological value. The Rubens site is further located in the established archaeological zone 'Historic City Center of Antwerp' and in the UNESCO World Heritage buffer zone of the cathedral and Museum Plantin Moretus. The projects addition of building volume in an area with an exceptional heritage value required a thorough preliminary study in which insight was gained into the building history. The original design was the starting point here. In all design decisions I have had to justify and demonstrate why a building or part of a building or open space was to be modified, always taking into account the heritage value. The proposed additions and modifications have all been dictated by the specific needs of the competition program of requirements and designed so as to enhance the appreciation of the rich historical layering of the monument and its surroundings. The experience of working with such a valuable piece of heritage as well as the challenges of working towards a competition brief has been enlightening and are both aspects of the profession that will hopefully present themselves again in my future in practice. The context driven nature of the studio will undoubtedly prove itself valuable as the increasing density of cities demands innovative interventions that respectfully build upon the layers of history surrounding a project. The overarching theme of the Intimate city and its constantly shifting, diverse, metropolitan conditions in which its subjects as individuals encounter and confront both others and themselves in various 'City Rooms' are too important considerations that have challenged me to expand my ways of thinking throughout the processes of both research and design, and I am grateful for it.