

Reflection Paper
TRACES OF TRANSITION

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Project Location

The graduation studio focuses on Hoboken, a district in the south of Antwerp, located in an urban fabric made up of contrasts: industrial heritage, polder landscapes, fragmented housing. It is a place in transition, moving from an industrial past to an urban future. But how will this transition look like? How can displacement and loss of identity be avoided?

Issues at hand

The neighbourhood suffers from a lack of public amenities, leaving residents without accessible spaces for gathering, recreation, or community-building. Additionally, the site itself includes abandoned industrial halls left to decay, representing untapped potential for revitalization. Efforts to make use of the abandoned structures were made. Half of the factories were occupied by artist, workshops and cultural spaces, but only temporarily, until an urban plan is put in motion. The fragile future of the artist community that are occupying the halls, under the name of Blikfabriek, threatens to displace the creative energy. Adding to these challenges is Blikfabriek's disconnected location, which limits its integration with the surrounding urban fabric, further isolating it. Therefore, the site battles complex dynamics as it involves many actors with opposing interests. As architects, we were invited to explore these dynamics, and through research and design, propose implementations, ideas, views, and opinions for the future of the site.

Research

Our initial research phase was collective, exploratory, and open-ended. We were encouraged to explore the site through various lenses and scales. Under the theme "Make Belief," we investigated the social dynamics that make up the cultural hub. We discovered that Blikfabriek functions almost like a stage, where spatial and social improvisation thrive. The site's most powerful quality is its constant evolution, driven by the agency of its users. This participatory adaptability became central to my project. The collective exhibition we curated during this phase helped ground our positions and created a shared foundation for the next design steps.

The next stage of the process involved proposing a masterplan for the area. My group, formed by Julia, Merle and myself, focused on preserving the site's raw diversity and character. Instead of unifying or sterilizing the space, we embraced its imperfections. It's what gives Hoboken its own identity. It must be continued rather than rewritten. We analysed the site "as found", and carefully decided what to remove, transform and preserve, locations by location rather than an proposing a uniform approach. This was a continuation of my own project. I began to look at buildings differently, not just as finished objects, but as living entities.

Through on site research, I got to understand the more nuanced layers of existence of the communities in Hoboken. There was something deeply unsettling in the idea that it could disappear, not because it had failed or become irrelevant, but because of the simple logic of profit. The buildings are not just concrete and steel. They are part of the local memory, an active participant in its neighborhood's evolution. I couldn't help but wonder: What happens to those stories, the silent witnesses of everyday life, when the building is gone?

This initial emotional response became the catalyst for my research. I started asking: Why do we accept demolition so easily? Especially now, in the midst of a climate crisis, when the carbon cost of destroying and rebuilding is so high. This theme deeply connected back to the studio's underlying theme: Gift and Waste. The site has so much material value, how can we avoid turning it into waste.

The structure chosen for the design project is a seemingly unremarkable structure. A former factory for rim painting, built out of concrete. Although it may seem like a banal structure, it holds immense potential. Due to the span, the height, the materiality, it can become almost anything. Why would anybody tear it down.

Research and Design

I was particularly inspired by Stewart Brand's concept of "Low Road Buildings": cheap, flexible, and easy to adapt. It led me to the realization that a building performs best after its original function faded. As a result, its creative potential has expanded. This perspective shaped my design research. I wasn't simply trying to preserve the building; I was trying to understand *how* it continues to become. In this way, my research was not just a backdrop. It directly influenced design decisions. The feedback loop between research and design was central: identifying traces, uses, and spatial behaviors on site allowed me to design architectural interventions grounded in reality. Additionally, designing on site also sharpened my questions and helped clarify what exactly I wanted to uncover or test next.

To do so, I took on the role of an investigator. I explored archives, photographs, and conducted site visits to uncover the building's layered history and ongoing transformations. Traces left behind: graffiti, fire escape plans, altered walls, trash, papers, scratches, became my archive. These informal uses, often dismissed as temporary or marginal, revealed deep insights into how space continues to exist. Observing these patterns allowed me to propose a design that embraces the imperfections and asks for transformation.

I mapped these traces and used them as a starting point for design. They helped me make key decisions: where to insert openings, how to position functions, what kind of insulation and climate strategy to pursue. The process became an ongoing dialogue between observation and intervention. I wasn't aiming to freeze the building in time, but to set it up for continued evolution. That approach has been instrumental. It allowed me to shift fluidly between scales and disciplines, a methodological freedom that the academic setting of this studio encouraged and supported. The feedback I received during mentor sessions, particularly the call to slow down and "listen to the building more", was crucial in clarifying my direction as well as my role in the project.

Design

The design focuses on a demographic often overlooked, much like the building itself: the youth. In contrast to over-programmed architecture, my proposal creates space for young people simply to *be*. Ethically, this emphasis on enabling rather than controlling speaks to a broader societal question: who gets to shape space, and whose presence is deemed acceptable or valuable? I see the project as a small but meaningful act of spatial justice.

Relevance

Reflecting on this process, I see academic and societal relevance in my proposal. Academically, it contributes to discussions on circularity, adaptive reuse, and informal urbanism. It offers an architectural approach that is less obsessed with novelty and more concerned with continuity, care, and transition. Societally, it resists top-down redevelopment narratives and instead suggests that value can also lie in the overlooked and the already present structures. On a larger scale, it suggests an alternative view to redevelopment that questions demolition in times of climate crisis.

Moving further

Looking forward, I intend to create a short film to tie together the building's story. This film will serve as conclusion and visual representation of my research. Alongside it, I will refine the architectural material and finalize the spatial proposal. Importantly, the strategies I've developed of reading traces, valuing informality, and designing with temporality in mind are transferable beyond Blikfabriek. They offer approaches and mindsets that can be applied to similar post-industrial, undervalued urban sites.