

Reflection

This year, the Urban Architecture graduation studio focused on a former industrial zone in Hoboken, Antwerp - an area caught between its temporary present and what it might become. At stake are urgent questions: how can we make Low Town endure as a downtown? And how might we integrate, rather than displace, the physical spaces and social networks that have emerged in its current in-between state?

My thesis project, Gradients of Comfort, engages these questions through the transformation of the former can factory known as Blikfabriek into permanent public and educational spaces. Today, comfort in architecture is typically defined in absolute terms, where anything outside a narrow band marked on comfort charts is labeled as undesired - and thus something to avoid at all costs. This binary view is embedded in the infra-spatial logic of contemporary building practice, where systems for achieving comfort - heating, cooling, lighting, and ventilation - are treated as secondary, but necessary, add-ons - mechanical and concealed, yet dominant in shaping spatial experience. In existing structures like Blikfabriek, pursuing today's standards often leads to unsustainable technical solutions and economic strain. The project instead asks how architecture might challenge this logic - by highlighting the relationship between body and environment and proposing a more layered, adaptive understanding of comfort. One that acknowledges its fragility, but sees in that fragility the potential for richer sensory experience and more resilient public architecture. In this way, the project contributes to the studio's broader inquiry into how the halfway city might retain its civic dynamics and remain open to public life, even as the move toward permanence becomes inevitable.

Approaching the site

Together with Carolina Bongiorno, Julia Kudła, Fabian Wachter, and Sacha Oberski, I worked under the shared research topic Material Garden of Gift and Waste. We approached Blikfabriek not as a tidy problem to solve, but as a living site - leaking, layered, unpredictable. Like a real garden, it resists control and rewards resilience.

We moved through the site fragment by fragment: mapping material flows, tracing informal routines, and documenting gestures of care. Our research combined interviews, hand drawing, field notes, and collective making. Inspired by Bruno Latour's notion of partial visibility, we let go of the single image and embraced gaps, overlaps, and reassembly. This thinking resulted in our exhibition model: a field of 46 cast tiles, each carrying a fragment of the site. Visitors could turn and rearrange them, reactivating the landscape through touch. The model wasn't a final object - it was a tool for reflection and conversation.

This early collective phase pushed me beyond my usual methods – we had to get very physical with site, document, interview and trace what in detail what is there. Working collectively required me to listen more carefully, to let go of control. What I value most is

how this openness shaped not only our final output, but the way we worked together: without leaving things open - without the space to question, adjust, and build on each other's findings - I don't believe we could have arrived at our exhibition piece. I'm grateful for how much we learned from one another along the way, and for how this shared knowledge of the site stayed with me, informing my thinking and design until the very end.

Individual research

My research began with a thorough engagement with existing literature on comfort in architecture, which provided the necessary theoretical foundation for understanding the complexities of the subject. This literature helped me navigate the broad field and gave me the tools to orient myself within it. Drawing from this knowledge, I then employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate how comfort and discomfort manifest within Blikfabriek. The site's distinctive spatial qualities, where interior and exterior often blur, provided an ideal setting for exploring how occupants experience their surroundings. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the people who inhabit the space, supplementing these with sketches, photographs, and field notes. Additionally, I kept a personal journal to

track my own sensory experiences of comfort and discomfort as I moved through the building. Basic environmental monitoring further allowed me to observe the physical conditions of the site. This combination of methods felt most aligned with the studio's scope and timeline, allowing me to focus on the lived experience of the site in a qualitative, grounded manner.

The literature review, alongside attending exhibitions and talks, provided a necessary entry point into the complex topic of comfort in architecture. Without this foundation, it would have been difficult to frame my research or make sense of the site's many dynamics.

However, I found that my most valuable insights came from the on-site ethnographic methods I used. By focusing on personal observations and interviews, I gained a deeper understanding of the site's social and spatial dynamics, offering insights that I believe have more relevance within the context of this project than theoretical models alone. While the broader literature and external talks informed my understanding, it was the focus on qualitative, human-centered data that I felt contributed most meaningfully to the conversation around comfort in architecture.

Design

Starting from the urban scale helped ground the project in a broader context. The initial phase of collective research and masterplan studies gave us a shared spatial language, which made it easier to situate individual design decisions later on. I found it valuable that our groups were newly mixed after the initial research phase. It new fresh perspectives, allowing us to revisit the site through a different lens. Working together on the large-scale physical model helped test abstract ideas in concrete form and clarified how our projects related across the site, particularly in the zones between.

A key challenge was addressing the scale and inertia of the existing industrial halls - spaces not designed to be urban, but now inevitably blending into the city's fabric. The idea of "urbanizing Lageweg" helped structure this shift. It framed the linear logic of the site as a sequence of spatial bands, guiding both circulation and programmatic distribution.

For my own design, I chose to extend the existing Blikfabriek program and combine it with a secondary school. I saw this hybrid not as a collision of functions, but as an opportunity: to create productive overlap between learning and making, permanence and informality, institutional presence and civic openness.

A school introduces rhythm and identity to a place - but placing it within a site like this, already full of informal spatial cultures, meant the design had to be inserted with precision. Initially, I had considered other typologies such as living and working but the fixed and rational nature of the school proved to be a better fit. It gave the project clear spatial and programmatic demands, which could then be reshaped by the site's irregularities and social complexity. The result, I hope, is a realistic balance between institutional clarity and the openness of a public building - respecting what already exists without displacing it. Throughout the design process, drawing was more than a means of representation - it became a method of thinking. Working by hand, layering sketches, revisiting fragments, I developed a cyclical design process that mirrored the adaptive theme of the project. The looseness of this approach allowed me to stay open to uncertainty, especially at the edges where the school meets the Blikfabriek, or where interior meets exterior. After the P3 presentation, feedback from Building Technology and Architecture tutors encouraged me to engage more directly with the role of climate within the broader topic of comfort. This led me to revisit the façade which resulted into introducing for example a winter garden on the south facade. Adapting

this idea to the rhythm of a school required rethinking scale, orientation, and the relationship between climate, program, and atmosphere.

Concluding the project

In the final weeks, the project gained definition through making. Building the 1:333 collective model with our masterplan group was a key moment. It wasn't just about showing our proposals - it allowed us to design the shared spaces between them. We worked side by side to shape the public space, overlaps, and continuities that connected our projects. Seeing how they complemented each other made their relationships tangible in a way that drawings alone couldn't achieve. In parallel, I continued working at 1:33 scale to test the design physically. This model helped me observe how the facade responds to depth, light, and appearance. Shifting between scales, from urban context to spatial detail, helped clarify how the project operates across time, weather, and occupancy – which helped finalize the drawings.