

**GRADUATION PROJECT
P4 REFLECTION**

Interiors, buildings, Cities
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Introduction

During this past year the different research themes and design interests have shaped my project into its current form. Indeed, this had a major influence on my design process. Writing this reflection paper gives me the opportunity to have a closer look at the process of my research and the process I went through in order to reflect upon them and examine how they could influence my future designs.

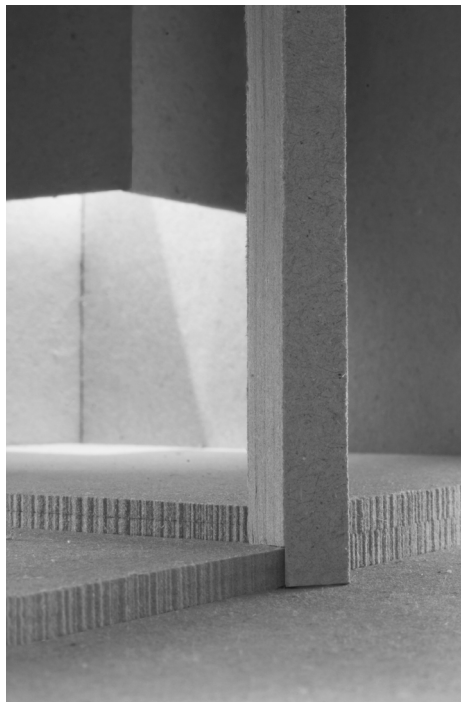
The proposal of my graduation project is a Craft Center in the city of Antwerp, Belgium. This Craft Center offers a broader range of professional education field supporting the existing craft schools of Antwerp. The dimension of the site (7200 m²) located in the city center has given the possibility to host an educational program of wood, metal and masonry craft including young entrepreneurs as a whole, situated on the same site.

Research

One of the first research topics during the first semester was to define our own definition of a “City room” related to the yearly topic of the “Intimate City”. Three study trips have been conducted in the metropolises of Paris, Milan and Antwerp, respectively. Those trips gave the opportunity to wander and explore different private buildings, public buildings, streets, courtyards and so on, which offered us the possibility to define our own detailed interpretation of a city room. Many elements became relevant for defining such spaces, for example: the history and context, the function, the social role, the materialization, its function according to the day time, public or private... However, the elements defining the space appeared to me as particularly important as it influences the proportion of the space. Redrawing the bad and good references in section and massing plan comparing them proved to be a successful tool to me to understand how thresholds of space delimitation can be made including the relation between the height and length of a space.

The moment where public and private spaces get blurred, to me is the moment when an intimate city room reveals itself. The aspects which has no physical statement but are purely defined by the users were hard to understand and see. The key tool to me was to spend time on the site at different timeframes of the day observing the users which shows the role those spaces can take on by the society.

Looking carefully into references, one which really appealed to me since the beginning was the RDM Campus Rotterdam, a hotspot of innovation. The former shipyard, a place where shipbuilders once worked offers now an exciting private-sector, combining education and research initiatives. This campus demonstrates successfully that a harbor area close to the city center can offer more than just an educational program for the city, where young entrepreneurs have their own space under the same roof and can access to the school facilities, as well as the possibility to team up with partners in education. This new educational system merging students with the professional field is a booster for innovation, which has been applied for years now in Switzerland and Austria. This variety of users attracts another type of users and becomes a meaningful public building for the the city and citizens and ‘non-students’ of the craft school into the world of craft. Having a closer look and analyzing significant precedents of craft schools helped me in understanding how architecture can create an impact on the education and motivated the students to become good craftspeople. Schools that have a large impact on the scale of the city have seen different concepts of an architectural gesture within the city. These various analyses offered me an in-depth knowledge background to start designing my own “Craft Center” in the old harbor of Antwerpen, called “Het Eilandje”.



P1 City room model

Urban concept

In the meanwhile, in analyzing precedents, an urban concept for the site had to be developed. The understanding of the existing urban mass has a significant impact on the design process referring to the relation between the existing surroundings, public spaces and how to integrate the studio's year theme of "Intimate City". Besides an area exploration, I built a site model in the scale of 1/500 showing the area of "Het Eilandje" and the immediate surroundings of the chosen site.

The former harbor area of "Het Eilandje" had no function after the second World war II when the port expanded northward. It needed to be more accessible and efficient for nowadays arrivals of large scale container vessels. The busy port life disappeared and people moved from this area. For decades "Het Eilandje" was a barrier between Port and city. The rational harbor organization of its infrastructure and large scale masses are characteristics of the neighborhood. Over the last 10 years the area has been enriched and reinvigorated with several architectural interventions and new buildings offering different functions in order to revitalize the old harbor. However, referring to the intimate city, as I had the opportunity of wandering and exploring the site, my observation is that the revitalization is not a success and achieved yet. Indeed, the harbor is still undergoing major changes and constructions and is not yet finalized. Thus, designing an "Intimate City Room" within my project seems important and can bring even more revitalization, encompassing a defined space at a human scale for the citizens, as it doesn't exist in the neighborhood yet.

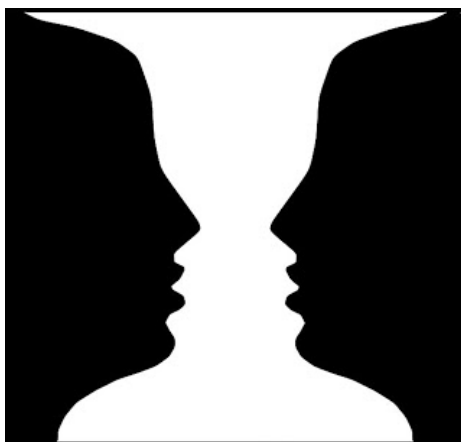
The chosen site of the former Montevideo Warehouse build in 1895 used by the the red star line cruiser ship company is a ruin nowadays, from which the roof broke down and only the peripheral walls remain. This gap in the urban fabric offered an ideal site for a "Craft Center".

As a first step, rough models in scale 1/500 integrating the "Craft Center" containing the program were tested in order to get a visualization of the scale. My first intuition was to integrate several buildings within the existing wall structure organized in a way that it would create courtyards within the block and, ahead, the main building facing the main adjacent square on the north side.

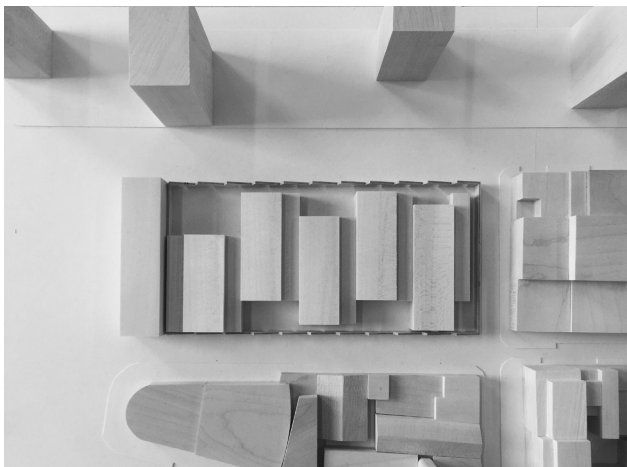
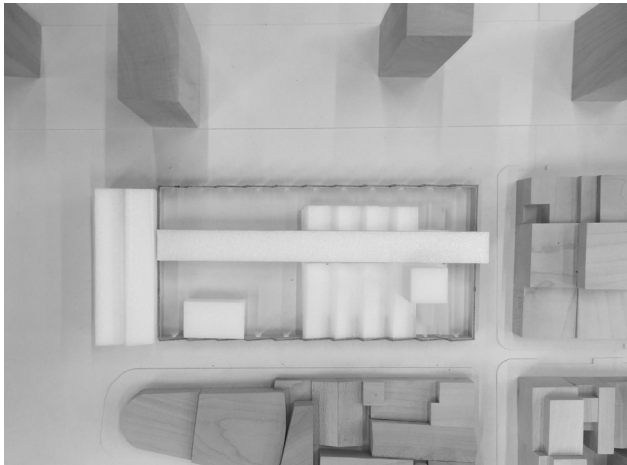
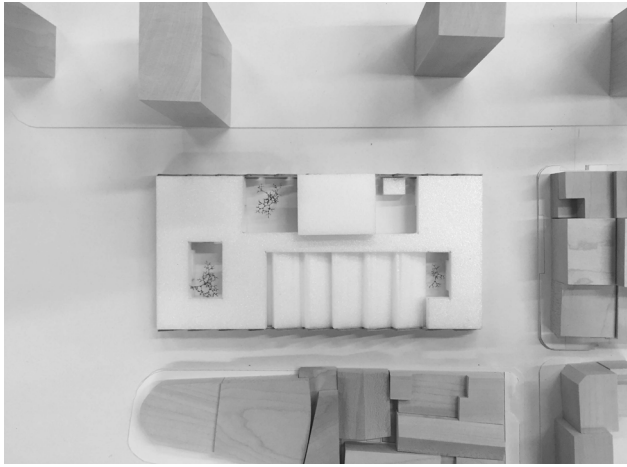
For the P2 presentation the internal organization within the block was based on an infrastructure intended to design a city within the city. The program would be accommodated in a stacked way, containing public activities on the ground floor and educational activities in the upper floors. Although I felt that the general scale with low rise building introducing a human scale within the walls of the existing warehouse and a main building as representation building facing the square was successful, I wasn't sure about the stacked program as I was looking to merge different functions and to offer a direct dialogue within the different functions of the "Craft Center".

After the P2, some significant changes were made on the massing and its organization. Looking back on a larger scale the urban fabric of Antwerp and making clear what my intention were as architectural gesture for “Het Eilandje”, I became more critical about my proposed design. The facade from a classical urban block defined a clear barrier between the public and the private surrounding courtyards, which are purely private and not accessible for “non-inhabitants” of the block. The inverse of the mass and void of the classical block² for the “Craft Center” would offer to the urban fabric of “Het Eilandje” blurred spaces between public and private spheres and opens the building up toward the city, which I have research and found as successful in many city rooms.

The urban fabric of the harbor is mainly composed of large scale buildings organized on a rational grid. Although the program requires large workshop the small scale exterior spaces are required to offer a human scale for the citizens within the neighborhood. Trials of the right rhythm according to the building function, and dialogue with the existing context into the physical 1/500 urban model seemed to be the right tool in finding the correct urban design. However, after defining the strong rhythm combined with an east-west axis shift, it seemed to define the right volume. Then, came the moment of designing the expression of the building on a smaller scale as an ensemble.



Rubin Vase: Alternative figure-ground relation of vase and heads



Architectural language

An important aspect during the design process was the architectural language my building reflects towards the context. This process started by taking a closer look at the surrounding context and history of the area. As highlighted previously, “Het Eilandje” was a harbor with an industrial and rational architecture purely for efficiency and practical reasons. Over the last decades the function has changed however, the character is still present. The challenge was to keep that expression with a new public building within such a historical industrial context. In my opinion, buildings should be embedded in the context starting from the large onto the small scale. I propose to support this language with a rational steel light structure combined with adjacent heavy concrete block service volumes, and as an ensemble with the rhythmic urban design merged with the existing rhythm form the historical warehouse. This horizontal and vertical structure is directly expressed in the facade as a clear rational grid.

The existing warehouse wall is classified as a monument and has been designed with beautiful details. In order to respect this monument, the new building is placed in a second row and the materialization of the new “Craft Center” is taken over from the context: corrugated steel, concrete blocks, concrete and polycarbonate, with raw, rough and robust materials for a building in which ‘working’ is the main function. Although this seems gloomy and gray, the users will bring character into the building in using it and this will emphasize the exterior adjacent “city rooms” activated by the existing shed wall as symbol of the historical and new craft workers’ building.

The main building at the head follows the same concept - the two extra floors and placed at the exterior of the existing perimeter as a facade for the square, emphasize the main building and entrance building. On the ground floor an arcade along the building invites the public and creates again an ambiguity between public and private spheres as a welcoming architectural gesture.

For my P3 presentation I presented an 1/200 model of my city room and workshop hall including the architectural language it should express. I built the facade in a physical model to see the depth I wanted to achieve. It was a good moment to reflect on it and did not feel as entirely convincing. The building could have been a dwelling building or an office building... This was confirmed as well in one of the comments I received from my professors for its architectural expression. This motivated me to work further on it and to find the right industrial language and at the same time keeping a school expression. Several sketch models have proved to be a successful methodology with which I am going to work further with.

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P3 1/200 physical model



City room progress, 1/200 Physical model

I Eireen Schreurs, and all. *The New Craft School*. Jap Sam Books, 2018.
II Padovan, Richard. *Towards Universality: Le Corbusier, Mies, and De Stijl*. Routledge, 2001.