

P5 REFLECTION

Interiors, Buildings, Cities

“The Intimate City”

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Introduction

This year the topic of the studio is based on 'the intimate city'. The topic suggests that the city is a place where people come together, where private selves are brought into contact and collision with each other in public. In contemporary society, the relationship among people, architecture and city is intricate and complicated. City and its buildings shelter us, and they shape our behaviors while we reprogram them in return. Therefore, the notion 'intimacy' implies multiple meanings in these complex relationships, which involves the interaction of objective environment, the subjective interpretation of individuals and other subtle parameters. How to understand and clarify this notion in a specific urban context becomes the main intention of my graduation project.

The relationship between research and design

The site of the project is located in Antwerp, Belgium, which is organizationally, spatially, culturally, demographically, and economically diverse. The vacant 'waiting sites' can be seen everywhere within the city, even forming a unique urban appearance of Antwerp. Most of them seem to be suddenly pulled out of the city, leaving the voids that reminds people of what they used to be. At the same time, however, they are indicating the birth of new content. As an architect, recognizing the urban identities and attributes of these voids and refilling them is the inescapable responsibility we are given. There are two phases to solve this issue – 'identification' and 'refill', in other words, 'research' and 'design'.

The phase of research is to clarify the meaning of the site in terms of social, culture, urban morphology and spatial form. Just like the 'self' in public is defined by the 'public', researching the context of the site can also reveal its identity and attribute. The object of research includes the urban entirety as a vessel and the urban fragment as a community.

A city is composed of thousands of buildings. Researching the city as a whole can reveal the intrinsic logic of its evolution, and the research on representative architectural precedents will verify the validity of the logic in practice. When it is proved to be universal in the city, the logic can be considered as a specific rule to guide the following design. For example, at the beginning of the research we experienced and perceived the city from a phenomenological perspective. On a more abstract level, we combed through the historical development of Antwerp. Besides, by way of urban morphology, we researched the public factors within the city – including outdoor public spaces and public rooms – and then followed by the analysis of urban strategies of representative architectural precedents. After all these researches, we had an overall understanding of the city, which was to be consciously brought into the design phase, thus rationally generating a resonance

with the city.

When the chosen site had been determined, the research on its immediate surroundings was conducted. This research process resulted in the most direct prerequisites and evidences for the design phase. For the project to be designed, the summarized rules on urban level is underlying, but the characteristics of the urban fragment in which it is located can be directly perceived. Therefore, architecture, as it appears in the environment, should correspond to the context, of which the patterns, forms and function of the city are a part. The research on these aspects is the basis for making decisions in the design phase.

After the research mentioned above, it was expected to collect conditions affecting the project. In the following design phase, the project was supposed to respond to these conditions, through which it will develop its own subjectivity.

The research on Antwerp shows that there are many nice public spaces hiding behind the street-facing buildings. These buildings serve like guard wall to protect the fragile public life hidden inside. This is a very intriguing way of organization of the city, which is also featured by my project. The two street-facing buildings in my project are an office and a boutique hotel with a café on the ground floor. Connected to the street by a mysterious passageway is the internal wellness center, which provides citizens with an escape from their bustle daily life.

The massing of the project is determined by the spatial form of the block, aiming at stitching up the urban fabric. Therefore, in the project you can see the distributed tiny courtyards, the high and low masses, and the intention of claiming the public square. The expressive concrete structure of the ground floor is inspired by the roof of the existing passageway, and it extends from the passageway to the other side of the project. It is a unique structural landscape that inherits the characteristic of the existing heritage building on the one hand, and even develops its own subjectivity on the other. The upper storeys above the ground floor are mainly covered by bricks to correspond to the materiality of the immediate surroundings, while still maintaining its self-expression of the motif in form.

In the interior of the public room of the project, namely the café with foyer of the hotel, people will get an intuitively intimate experience. 'Intimacy' means familiar and comfortable. Although the ceiling structure of the public room is unreachable, it visually declares its sense of order. The walls and furniture that people can touch directly are clad in wood, which is a very friendly and warm material. In this public room, people's experience is one of the most significant parameters taken into account. Therefore, people can feel that they are well respected and cared, thus creating the intimacy in the public.

Relations to Wider Social Framework and Transferability of Results

In general, the results of the design phase are the translation of the previous research. In a wider social and professional framework, the methodology is transferable. It constructs a way to interpret complex urban environments and translate them into design outcomes. Although the complicated urban issues as inputs and the subjective choices of the designer in response to objective conditions will lead to a rich diversity of design outputs, in the guide of the methodology, the rational logic underlying this diversity is still interpretable. According to such a 'research-design' process, it is expected to generate richly intertwined relationships among people, buildings and the city. Furthermore, while the city is organically evolving, it does not lose the intimacy as a place to gather citizens and provide public life for them.