

REFLECTION PAPER

PERSONAL INFORMATION

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STUDIO

Urban Architecture Graduation Studio / low town down town

MENTORS

Rosie van der Schans (architecture)

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TITLE

dissecting urban fragments - *assembling the city*

INTRODUCTION

My graduation year at the chair of Urban Architecture at TU Delft consisted of the meticulous exploration of a place in the south of Antwerp and a resulting proposal for an architectural intervention. While assembling what I now conceived as my graduation project I also further developed my own personal architectural identity while finishing my studies on the way to obtaining my masters degree. With this reflection paper I want to look back at the process that led me to the decisions I took and how I turned the input I collected from different sources throughout this last year into the output that is my project. I chose for a chronological narrative since the individual steps of my process segue well into each other and I took insights from each stage with me into the next one.

The loose framework of the studio encouraged all of us to dive deep into the given site and our own prerequisites in terms of experiences, curiosities, skills and preferences. This results in a beautifully diverse selection of proposals and focal points throughout the entire studio. The course was titled *low town down town* in reference to the condition of the given site along Lageweg in Antwerps southern district Hoboken. A large abandoned industrial complex currently far from what one would consider a downtown but full of potential to one day being transformed into a centre in the urban archipelago that is the nebular city of the low lands.

P1 - EXHIBITION / GROUP RESEARCH

During the initial research phase, before the first intermediate presentation, we explored the site with a given task at hand: gather in groups of five and create a piece for a joint exhibition that highlights a part of the identity we encountered. The collaborative effort and resulting knowledge gained still serve as inspiration up towards finishing the project, close to a year afterwards. Mostly unguided exploration and taking in as much as we could dictated our applied methods. Finding a multitude of lenses through which we perceived the site helped in understanding its inner workings and the actors influencing its development.

I applied this approach of unguided exploration and willingly being lead by my own subjective perception of the site throughout all phases of the project. Whether it be the early research conducted while grasping the entirety of the area or more specific endeavors into the site I later chose for my own project, I kept an open mind and open eyes towards what could be found and later reassembled into usable input for the project.

P1.5 - MASTERPLAN / DESIGN METHODS

The design process of the studio was initiated by the creation of a proposal for an urban masterplan of the entire postindustrial site in groups of three. Through careful reading of the existing condition we approached the area. During this process we developed a great appreciation for what we found on site while also depicting shortcomings in the existing mass of buildings on their way to becoming a relevant part of the city.

This appreciation lead to a design process based on what is already there. Through demolition we carefully carved our urban proposal from the built up area of factory halls. Creating new axes traversing the site and reactivating the ones that once were. Increasing the porosity of the site by penetrating the perceivable enclosure surrounding the introverted factory complex. Opening up urban squares inside an area formerly unreachable for the public.

We titled the state of the design we were left with after demolition as the *new existing* and used it as a starting point for thinking of our planned additions. Incorporating the program dictated by a real urban masterplan commissioned by the city on Antwerp, while still questioning their given brief and asking what the site really needs on the way to become a downtown. The additions we decided on are meant to complement what we found rather than superimposing an external vision onto a site rich in character already. The result is a masterplan which speaks the language of the site, referencing its past while preparing it for a more hopeful and integrated future as a part of the urban fabric.

P2 - PERSONAL ANGLE / RESEARCH METHODS

During the creation of the masterplan design and the joint exhibition piece we already started to conceive a personal angle towards our own individual graduation project on the way towards our P2 project proposal. My personal research methodology relied heavily on spending time on site and grasping the found. Carefully dissecting from the sheer mass of input raining in on me throughout the year, taking in relevant fragments of said input and reassembling them into my own interpretation of the site and in consequence my architectural project.

This idea of dissection, fragmentation and assemblage was a guiding factor all along and is the basis to my applied strategies. I collected my found fragments through different mediums, with analogue photography at the forefront. The careful and conscious act of shooting images onto film helped in the dissection process of momentary traces. Assembling them over time leads to a temporal component that an individual photo lacks. The transfer of the scenes I encountered at different points in time into digital drawing and physical modeling enabled me to grasp the objectivity of space and the subjectivity of any given moment experienced in it.



P3 - ARCHITECTURAL CONCEPT / PROGRAM

Based on my research concerning the identity of the site I was aiming to design a representative space that captures said identity and makes it perceivable for outsiders and future inhabitants alike. For my individual design project I chose a piece of our masterplan that dealt with the reactivation of an old entrance to the complex and the creation of a square just inside the perimeter. A public urban square as the archetype of urban architecture which is created by demolition and shaped by additions.

In reference to the ancient greek agora as an assemblage of urban life in all its facets I decided on a varied program flanking the square, inhabiting existing buildings and newly conceived ones alike. Residential, cultural, commercial and political functions share the space and create a varied offering towards potential users. The assortment of different functions and typologies aims to encourage the future inhabitants of Antwerps south to engage in a similar process of dissection, fragmentation and assemblage I applied while getting to know the site. Offering a wide spectrum of use cases and highlighting the subjectivity of each and everyones choices in their way of living life in the low town down town.

During the design process which is still ongoing I continue to gain an understanding for what urban architecture means to me. The integration of different disciplines dealing with the built urban environment makes for a sensitive approach towards creating space for people in the city. Starting with ecology, anthropology and urbanism and ending with architecture, spatial planning and building technology.

P4 - DEFINING THE PROJECT / RELEVANCE

The construction of my project also revolves around working with rather than against the restraints imposed by the site itself. Its existing connection to the urban tissue, the soil it stands on, the abandoned buildings encountered and the mass of material scattered throughout them dictate my design decisions from masterplan to detail. An assemblage of the found together with my additions marks a red line running through my entire project while creating an ensemble of the old and new.

This way of working in close relation with the site while incorporating my own preconceived ideas about the architecture of the city enabled me to envision an abstract approach to dealing with the existing condition which by definition results in site specific architecture. Its relevance towards the field lies in the focus of reconfiguration and willingly being lead by the found, rather than superimposing an ideal onto a given situation. A sustainable approach in every sense of the word, from social and historical sustainability by way of staying true to the found identity, economical sustainability by choosing construction methods with differing degree of complexity for different functions and ecological sustainability through material choices and the use of grey energy captured in the existing, already built long before I started to consider the site.

Working this close with a site and simultaneously along different scales was new to me but felt natural with the task at hand. The complexity of the site and its environment, situated in the vast scope of problems urban architecture has to deal with, in my opinion calls for an integrated way of working while considering the influences found on site. I consider it a successful approach to the studio since truthful urban reconfiguration is a process requiring much care and attention to detail.

REFLECTION ON THE PROCESS

My chosen concept of considering every bit of the existing to the point of often reintroducing what I initially thought to demolish had a vast influence on the outcome of my design. Even during consultations with my tutors I frequently traced back to the archival plans of the existing situation while explaining my decisions for its future. I felt very free in the process of creating my graduation project with great support in my stance taken. In research, architecture and building technology alike the feedback I received was usually based on questions about my narrative rather than a go or no-go on decisions I already took which enabled me to keep control over my own personal path while being guided during its development. This constant reminder of the bigger picture and the path I am on helped in understanding the scope of the project and its focal points. During this graduation year I learned a lot about approaching urban architecture but also myself, constantly reflecting on my own decisions and reactions towards situations with differences in terms of motivation, pressure and confidence. It truly captured a big step in the development of my own architectural identity during a highly formative period of my career and most importantly my life and I feel proud to share the outcome inside the framework of academia and beyond.

P5 - FINAL STEPS

On my way to the final presentation I will finalize the assemblage that is my project. I aspire to create a legible architectural proposal that encapsulates my personal process throughout this year along the different scales considered. Showcasing my findings collected on site and presenting the intervention I conceived from it. I am assembling my dissected fragments to form a story about this aforementioned place in Antwerp focusing on what I learned from its past and how I imagine its future.