Introductory manifest

United in diversity: shared social housing in today's Anderlecht

Our society is expanding and in response to this, cities are undergoing transformations. The pluralism of an individualized society, relating to one's own needs and desires, is perceptible in the way we dwell in the city. However, this doesn't mean that a larger cohesive (social) structure isn't essential. Indeed, Brussels, the capital of the European Union that carries the motto 'In varietate concordia,' consists of several fragmentations on an institutional level aside from an archipelago of urban fields. Therefore, pursuing an architectural solution that ensures harmony between the varied wishes of society becomes more relevant.

As a reaction to the individualized society and an approach against the fragmentation on different scales, the design project aims to reconcile the existing amorphous urban tissue. In other words: it encourages the characters of the site do justice to their own identity and subsequently engages in dialogue with them in order to achieve a stronger unity. While keeping in mind that the neighbourhood is characterized by its below-average median income and high population diversity, I believe that fragmentation can be transposed into rich stratification only when pluralism will be embraced.

To position myself and the graduation design project concerning the chair of Urban Architecture, I believe that the architect has the role of a mediator. With my aspiration to salvage as many built structures as possible, the affair of dissension will be approached with a curative attitude. This is in line with the studio's philosophy of positioning the building in relation to existing structures and "where expectations of urban design can only be fulfilled by architecture." Hence, the design project attempts to support (re)mediation on two levels. Firstly, remediating the fragments of the site that will lead to more unity, while enhancing the variety of the characters. Secondly, mediating the individualized society, while the diversity is cherished.

The design proposes a new social housing block and an extended structure that holds a Martial Arts school. Adjacent to this, the Les Goujons is a remnant of the 1970s modernist social housing in which social carries different connotations. The proposed design includes shared amenities , which normally are not self-evident in affordable housing. These amenities are designed to be communal spaces that ought to bring the residents together. Besides that, a fixed spine through the building with perpendicular flexible walls allow the housing units to be diverse and have their own unique features. How the building is situated between three fragments and exposed to different border conditions , is decisive for the placement of the units within the building contributing to these features. The variation in housing units also plays an important role to the aforementioned pluralism of an individualized society.

The design project suggests the theme of mirroring: it questions what to keep and what not, which then initiates a dialogue between the characters. In the context of the studio's topic, spolia in re is here primarily noticeable on the urban scale: higher residentials on the front side and industrial-sized structures on the rear side with a connecting courtyard shared by many.

In materialism, the spolia in se points out the collective amenities. This is captured in a curated collection of the exterior as well as interior elements. From reused pavements and an imposing portal for the courtyard, wooden flooring for the winter garden to sanitary elements, tiles, fittings and non-generic doors to indicate these communal spaces.

To summarize my notion, intention, and motives for this manifesto, I would like to conclude and mostly share my gratitude that this design project has allowed me to pursue my position as a (re)mediator in and pay tribute to the existing environment. Moreover, the project reveals my interest in engaging the social aspect of architecture.

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1 Quoted from the chair's information page.

2 Such as a laundry room, collective courtyard, roof garden and terrace, guestroom, a living area with kitchen, workspace/ atelier, bicycle storage, office space, winter garden on the south facade and a local service center.

3 The new public park around Les Goujons, the rear side of existing residentials with repurposed industrial buildings in the back, the street in style of Flemish Neo-renaissance, and the neighboring backyards with greenery.

Reflection paper

The relationship between your graduation topic, the studio topic and your master track Architecture.

The studio's topic of Spolia has served as a clear guideline for my graduation topic. It led to an extensive awareness of the existing urban tissue and how to approach it. The studio initiated and addressed, in my view, a very important key focus in architecture that every architect or designer should comply with. Namely, a justified approach to the existing building stock, where the cultural preservation is of great value but also the sustainable argumentation is fundamental. The topicality of this theme in architecture intrigued me to such an extent that I strived to anchor this project in a wide social framework of today. Consequently, the intersections where these three aspects meet has helped me frame my position towards the graduation studio and architecture in general.

Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework, touching upon the transferability of the project results.

In connection to the above-mentioned, the project reveals an interesting layer since the Dutch social housing is well developed tradition in history whilst the Belgian government owns not even 10 percent of the land. This has led to a consciousness in both directions. Thus, this project is not solely a matter of using Dutch state-of-mind in building homes, but also to comprehend the strong desire for house ownership in Belgium in order to find the strengths of both living cultures. This graduation project sheds light on both matters, which is perceptible in the in- depth research on the context of Brussels and the implementation of the design strategy that has its roots in Dutch architecture. So, mainly in the wider social and professional framework the graduation work exposes the architectural realm of both cultures.

The relationship between research and design

I perceive my research as a two-fold: on the one hand a preliminary assigned research theme of the Unstable city and on the other hand a personal and free exploration of research topics such as collectivity and affordable housing. The first-mentioned part of the research was a good starting point to get a grip on Brussels and the design location. From there on, curiosity derived and gave shape to the design project. I find this fruitful for the graduation process, since it kept me motivated and gave me the opportunity to create a project that is developed from my personal interest. In my opinion, that is where the graduation process is about: applying the skills that one has mastered and gained throughout the education trajectories on new topics.

I believe it was a good decision of the studio to not strictly divide the graduation project in research and design (even thought this is attempted in my research paper), but rather continue the research in MSc4 as well. Therefore, the early five months that have been dedicated to only research do not feel as representative to my end work as I have hoped for. In other words, the influences of the actual research results (based on my formulated research questions) on the design are little when considering the duration of MSc 3. Instead, I could relate more to the studio's question of 'what to keep? And what to build?'. However, the research topics that have been addressed guided the thinking process from stage to stage. Hereby, research methods such as field researches and literature were supportive and offered interesting new perspectives.

Overall, I could say that the research is scattered through my graduation project and only noticeable when relevant. Nevertheless, the project reached a satisfactory level where I have started to appreciate the different layers related to different thinking processes rather than the research results itself.

Elaboration on research method and approach chosen by the student in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry, reflecting thereby upon the scientific relevance of the work.

In an early stage, I positioned myself more towards empiricism on the polarized spectrum of research methods. Many field researches and on-site analyses resulted in observations and have supported me to form the project's concept. The conducted researches during the graduation project were mostly focused on the users and questions the relationship between the architect and the public. Besides that, the project explores among others the border conditions of different fragments. In doing so, the project contributes to the discussion about the role of the architect and how to cope with these two matters. The position has balanced between the architect as an activist, fighting for spatial justice, and as a facilitator, who engages people in the realization of the project (Avermaete, 2010, p. 48). In the end, I took up the role as the mediator who brings diversity together and aims for a harmonious synthesis.

Discuss the ethical issues and dilemmas you may have encountered in doing research, elaborating the design and potential applications of the results in practice.

Some issues and dilemmas that were encountered in doing research and designing were finding the line between private, collective and public. What are the boundaries and how is this spectrum between autonomous living and sharing amenities? How do you design for the individualized society and how is this expressed in housing units within the same building without inefficiency? What are the benefits in terms social, spatial, financial and environmental sustainability, but more importantly: who are benefitting from this?