

Graduation Reflection

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Interiors Buildings Cities

Community Crafts Centre

The main theme of this year's graduation studio was the concept of Intimate City. Within it, a special place was taken by the notion of "City Room". This is a space that has no clearly defined characteristics; us as students have had the assignment of contemplating and eventually represent our interpretation of it through our design.

Throughout the year, the distinction between research and design has been inevitably fading into an organic process of creation.

In the beginning of the year, a strictly research module saw us all travelling to Paris, and then to either Milan, Naples, Paris or Vienna in smaller groups. Coming back from these field trips, it was asked of us to try and define what creates the intimate atmospheres of these cities, and what therefore we thought generally results in a feeling of intimacy. Trying to extrapolate from our analysis a method of defining the intimate qualities of these cities, the research was aimed at giving us the tools to more consciously define the main characteristics of Antwerp - the city where the graduation project is set -, and the city's characteristics that also make it an intimate city. Eventually, this process would give us an idea of what to focus on to create a project that would be well inserted in its context as well as conscious of its place in the European panorama.

Following my trip to Naples, we were able to discern, from the specific case of the Mediterranean city, a number of elements that we thought could influence the feeling of any city. The main qualities we found during our analysis were those of Naples as a porous city, a city of stratification and a city of paradox. As this initial phase saw a lot of constructive discussions between people of different backgrounds but similar sensibilities, the analysis we ended up developing has been very deeply absorbed into our conscious, and therefore these elements have played an extremely important part for my personal project for the rest of the year.

After having identified some of the elements that made these cities intimate, we then tried as a bigger group to discern a library of tools to analyse Antwerp specifically as the intimate city, and also to try and define the concept of intimacy, both in its physical (the presence of people and the use people made of the built environment and the spatial qualities of places) and its more abstract premises (the sense of heritage, the history and the symbolism of the cities).



During these trips we were also brought to hold a certain regard for a series of public spaces that could be considered city rooms. This would perhaps help us to more easily think of these concepts less abstractly and more as architectural form.

After this initial phase we were then asked to design a contextless and functionless city room for the P1. This made so that we could very directly define an initial thought of what we think intimate means, what the intimate city is, what the city room is, and what its spatial and atmospherical qualities would be - which always have to be aware of the use people would make of them. Bearing in mind the lessons from the previous module, we proceeded to very straightforwardly address concepts and translate them into design ideas. Of course some solutions were more direct and easily legible as a spatial answer to the need for intimacy, such as the presence of columnades or integrated benches, but some other results were more

abstracted and perhaps unconscious, and were useful in their revealing of the importance of certain concepts in the experimentation of this topic. After this exercise it became obvious that out of other questions, the studies on atmosphere were the essential ones, and this prompted me to define a triad of elements that I thought build such notion: geometry, materiality and identity.

It was in any case really interesting to see how the city rooms we produced related back to the cities we had visited.



Since we then visited Antwerp and started what was meant as the research process for our final specific graduation projects, the relation between research and design started getting more complex and less clear. We had previously been almost scientific and anyway very methodical, and the results of the process had almost looked like a forthright cause-effect relation. Possibly because of how the new assignment were structured, and because of a very different discussion platform taking place in the studio, we started analysing Antwerp in small groups, but eventually we each chose our own site and programme, therefore researching and making decisions on our own. From that moment, we started working singularly on our project in a more organic, at times chaotic way, mixing programme research with site research with ethical research with precedent research with poetic research with methods research, all the while trying to understand what kind of building we wanted to design and what kind of messages or atmospheres we wanted to convey.

Rather than clear relationships between design decisions and the results of the analytical process, I was building a loose series of notions that came from my endless reflections around the multitude of topics touched in the first weeks of the project.

It is my opinion that the vastity of the topics - both from the brief of the chair and from the programme and site of choice - also augmented a sense of fog as to what was really important and what were the things to focus on. Ironically, I was interested in so many things I could not really dig deep into any of them, and everything seemed important enough that it should stay in the final project narrative.

Developing all these threads into a linear thought seemed like what would be a good way to work and advance in the process, but eventually everything was amounted together and clear consequential reflections were not easy to unfold. This was made clear in the P2, when a great number of hints were expressed but a lack of a clear, linear story was highlighted by the tutors.

The feedback gave me a chance to reflect on both what I was doing and how I was doing it. Fortunately, once the actual design phase started, a lot of the notions that were standing alone went back into place, and moving from the abstractness of the previous phase to the specificity of the graduation project helped me acknowledge what elements to focus on.

Although the beginning of the Antwerp project was confusing, the development phase saw the same kind of method work in a more positive direction. Still not a linear method, but a way of doing that was organic and circular, in which I would analyse certain things and then give direct response to an already begun project, a process of trial and error, of drawing, modelling, reading, and writing, of going back and forth on the same thoughts while adding new layers to them or new concepts entirely; adding to this a strong amount of personal perception and sensibility, of intuition, with the constraints of a context that through that organic analysis and through time I had grown to know better and better, made so that what I had once wanted to be a very abstract project naturally grew into a very specific one.

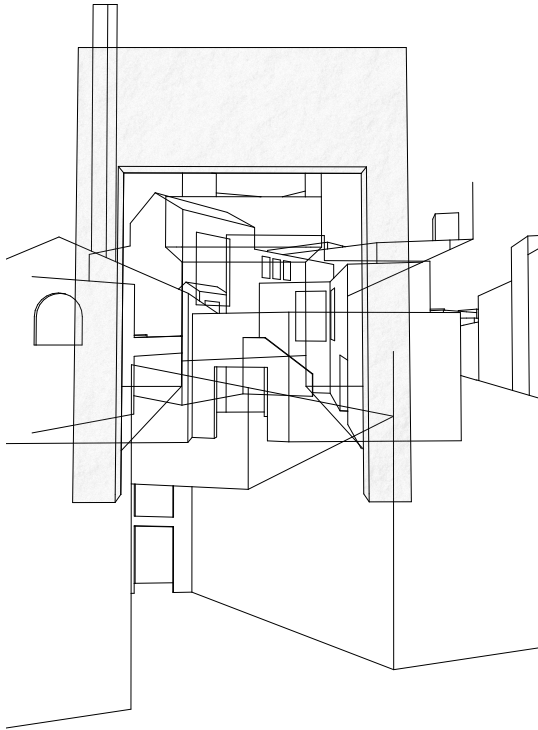
Whereas before I had set myself to try and understand what in general an atmosphere is and what it is composed of, throughout the year I have instead moved towards designing and crafting a certain environment for my project, always thinking back about the original classifications I had made regarding atmospheres but developing them and translating them in a more conscious way; and not in a universal, general way but a particular one.

Joining the creative process with the research one aided me to develop a smoother method. The process has been one of trial and error, which took hints and stores notions regarding the historical, social and physical context, regarding the premises and the aims of the programme and the lessons of the chair and of other architectural theories and frameworks. The project

is then developed through the accumulation of “evidence” and facts and the addition of personal intuition and ethical standpoints such as the respect for the existing. It is also developed through the trial and error process of doing things and understanding whether they fit in the general line of work that is organically being created, and understanding why and how before going on to try and bring it to its best expression within the limits of the timeframe.

Somehow, this trial and error journey made me appreciate even more the defining research questions and premises of the chair of Interiors Buildings Cities, and of what kind of architecture I am interested in and my project fits into.

It is a project that begins with the understanding of the meaning of institution - within the intimate city - and of what intimacy is.



The intimate city is a scenography for everyday life. It is a place where the dichotomy between contemplation and sharing materialises in a simultaneity of fragmented small experiences, that joined together through time offer the perception of the city as a whole.

The building is a public institution in that within the parameters of intimacy it tries to act as a scenography for the everyday life of its citizens.

I intend intimacy as intimacy within oneself and intimacy with others or as a collective.

What is then a public institution, per the brief, in the intimate city? It is a place of the everyday - where everyday actions can unfold and which can host the dichotomy of intimacy. It is a place where people can identify themselves as well as enhance their collective cultural identity, therefore feeling comfortable within themselves as well as in relation to others. It is a place where people feel comfort and familiarity. All of this describes my interpretation of the concept of intimacy, and therefore what the design strives to achieve with an atmosphere of intimacy.

The aim of this institution building is to be the material outcome of the collective identity. This brings to the framework of material culture, where artifacts are considered to be a cultural product of their time, place and social context. It therefore follows that a contextual approach has to be followed, as the best way to enhance this identity is

to take from the existing. Together with the contextual approach, an intuitive one has been adopted throughout the project.

A reflection on material culture brought me very directly to the idea of designing a community centre where culture would not only be circulated but also produced. A crafts community centre then became the programme of choice. This fit well within the growing attention, especially in Belgium, towards the concept of the Productive City. This is a tendency that sees an ever growing interest in a movement of productive buildings from outside the cities back towards their centres. It therefore wishes for a switch towards local, smaller productions, more sustainable processes and a generally more variegated city experience, where multiple functions coexist harmoniously.

A crafts centre also fit well within the double productive heritage of Antwerp, a city of guilds and of industries. In the past Antwerp has held a prominent position in the commercial and manufacturing business, with the guilds holding great power within the dynamics of the city. After the industrial revolution, its geographical position also allowed for it to become among the centres of industrial production and transportation.

Moreover, the programme allows for a multiplicity of functions to coexist, as is auspicious in a building that aims at being used all day, every day, where people can well in and make theirs.

The choice of site followed. A site in the North of the city was found, in direct relation to the old and new factories and to the productive heritage, to the East of the old port, the centre of the city's commercial heritage. A hint of new small scale spontaneous places of production can also be found while wandering around the area. The value of production seems to be already embedded in the collective identity.

The social context is one that also seemed suitable for such a programme. It is a generally poor area that is very densely inhabited. It is also an area with a high rate of unemployment a very low rate of tourism. However, it is a very vibrant, multicultural area, that seems like it just needs the right platforms to thrive. A lot has been done by the municipality to improve the area at an urban scale, trying to act with punctual interventions to introduce diverse classes in the neighbourhood and with bigger interventions, such as the Park Spoor Noord, to move the flow of people to these less central areas that are full of potential. These interventions are not only aimed at creating a new interest in the area for Antwerp's citizens, but also for the foreigners and the tourists who visit the city.

This area seemed to be extremely apt for a programme that hosts a multiplicity of events and actions, that everybody can engage with, which offers the possibility of using its facilities daily and which tries to enhance the co-living and co-working of people from all backgrounds.

The urban settlement of the project follows the contextual notations accumulated with the analysis. The site is now hosting a fragmented group of buildings used for storage, which the proposal sees demolished with the exception of three protected heritage elements: an old factory building, a chimney and the facade wall of another factory building. Through the principles and interests of the Interiors Buildings Cities chair, the proposed project tries to patch together these existing different building realities together with the rest of the surrounding built environment. It remains a porous volume, that joins together different

buildings but leaves space for a big courtyard in its middle with many routes cutting through the building to open the big scale, dense block and connect different urban axes. In a densely built area, the courtyard tries to assess a need for a more open urban fabric. The volume also treasures another characteristic of the site, which is that of the co-existing of extremely different scales of buildings, from small row housing to big warehouse buildings.

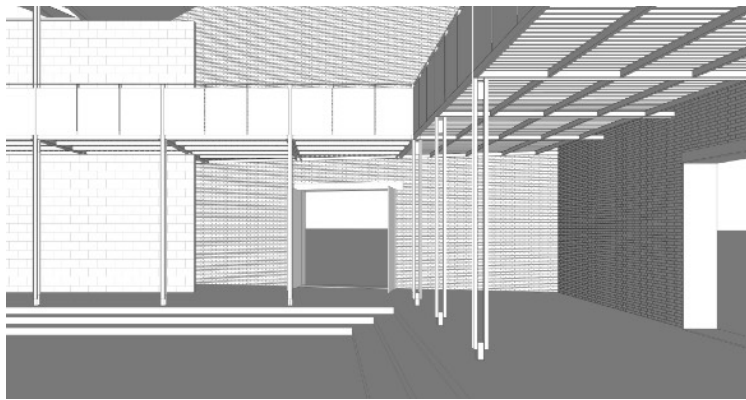
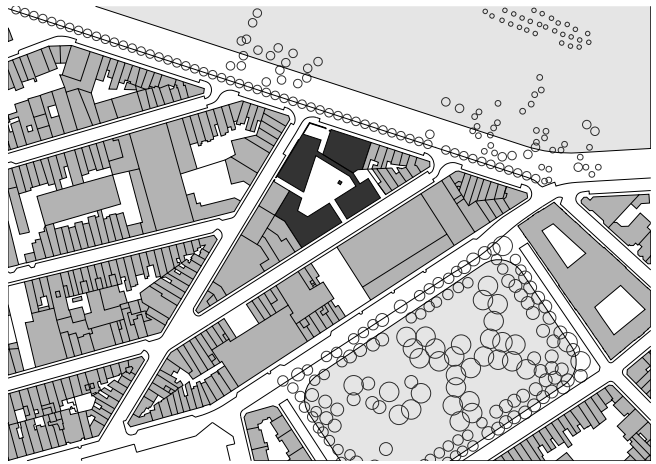
The plans, sections and elevations try to enhance the sense of belonging to the area through the use of familiar materials and proportions. The project is also developed as a multiplicity of fragmented rooms and realities that create a multiplicity of experiences. A sense of simultaneity is also sought, trying to create spaces in which you can be intimately gathered in your niche while together feel as though you are part of a bigger communal space. An open circular route towards the courtyard connects the building, enhancing a sense of rhythm and the explicit power of wandering throughout the building. The sequences of different spaces as you walk through the building are just as important as the singular rooms. These expedients are aimed at creating a project that is not only static, but takes into consideration the time you take to walk through it, the experience of the building as a whole after having inhabited it, as it happens with the complexity of cities.

These are all elements that are key to the chair - a study on the experience of a user, not only as a flow but also as a narrative sequentiality of experiences. As is the respect towards and the inspiration taken by the existing social, historical and physical context.

Another key aspect of the focuses of the chair is the materiality of a project. Great importance and work has been done in the narrative of the choice of materials and technologies used. Technology and atmosphere here start to act together, and a detailing of the physical qualities of the building goes hand in hand with both a symbolical, more abstract view of them and a sensorial feeling for them. To tackle the contextual approach in the material sense I decided to play between the two poles of crafts culture in Antwerp and their architectural

declination: on the one hand the heavy stone presence of the guilds, on the other the steel heritage of the industrial. This resulted in a play of materials that reflects the contrast of certain industrial heritage sites, where robust masonry external walls give place to slim steel structures inside of them. This play is also reminiscent of certain restoration methods - where a flexible lightweight intervention revitalises existing solid structures - since the project also works with integrating the existing and integrating within the existing. Time has therefore been given to the study of a solid brick facade towards the streets contrasting with a steel lightweight facade towards the courtyard, as well as the juxtaposition of steel slim elements surrounded by solid concrete - or brick - walls happening in the interiors.

The study on materiality has also been brought on with the ideal of trying to integrate technological and sustainability solutions within the project. The strategy has been one of creating a steel structural frame to which the brick facade and the concrete infill is then installed, leaving the building flexible for future changes in programme and in materiality. A number of installations has been adopted and integrated for the sustainability and the life of the building, and the programme is as well socially sustainable. The integration of existing structures and the reuse of parts of demolished buildings - such as the bricks - also made me aware of different kinds of sustainability throughout the development of the project. The life cycle of the building is addressed in terms of circularity but also with an attention towards the aging of the building, with a choice of materials that ages well as well as a number of solution to prevent an early damage of materials. Finally, the choice of a



porous, permeable volume, with an extremely green interior as well as a green roof is both a sustainable choice and one that adds even more layers to the intimate atmosphere of the building.

The project has taught me a number of specific solutions to the general problems we face as architects today, specifically regarding an attention to integrated sustainability and the human experience. It has also helped me realise what things I am personally interested in as a designer, thanks also to its strong identity and principles and the guidance of the tutors. Together with helping me understand a number of instruments that I will keep using in the future during my profession, it has also helped me understand the quality of the general principles when applied to the very specific situations and constraints that we have to act and create within. A number of visits to existing buildings has also aided me in understanding the real, concrete landing of a design and a programme on a social scale, making a theoretical design such as this a very useful instrument in also understanding the challenges, the premises and the aims of a real process for a real building in a real context.

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