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Reflection Graduation 2023-2024

Urban Architecture – Last Green in Town

For my graduation at the Urban Architecture studio, I would like to reflect on my experience this past year. I want to start by saying that I look back on a very great and informative year. Due to the structure of the studio, which involved zooming in from an urban to an architectural scale, my graduation project went through several phases. I would like to explain this by discussing my research, design, and guidance, and finally, by concluding with what I have learned over the past year.

Research

The studio's approach started with careful research on the Josaphat Friche site in Brussels. Initially, the broad scope seemed overwhelming, but through group work, various themes were divided among us, making the research more manageable and enjoyable. We collaborated as a team to develop our findings into a product and presented them to each other, facilitating a clear understanding of the site. This hands-on, fieldwork-based approach was my first introduction to the studio's research methodology.

During this period, I also began my individual research. I found that developing a suitable study for the vulnerable Josaphat Friche site was challenging. Initially, I considered mapping safety in Brussels and contrasting the large-scale inner city with the Friche's vulnerability. However, inspired by the studio's vision of hands-on fieldwork, I shifted my focus to how one experiences transitions while walking from the inner city of Brussels to the Friche.

I conducted this research by physically exploring these transitions. I documented the moments encountered along the route, photographed them, sketched them, and mapped them out. This method proved to be incredibly fun, educational, and valuable. I found that a spatial study involving movement through an area is very valuable for understanding architecture. This is something I will definitely carry forward with me.

Design

The design process began with creating a master plan for the site at the urban level, based on the findings from P1. This was done in new teams, and the master plan then led to developing a program for the building. This approach felt logical to me. I decided to start working with an existing building of considerable size. I thought that the existing structure would be both interesting and relevant in this day and age. Following the master plan, I determined that it should serve a public function, specifically as an Olympic swimming pool for the neighborhood. However, this decision brought about numerous challenges, both in terms of construction and climate considerations. Yet, these complexities also presented new opportunities, allowing the project to evolve. Placing the large Olympic swimming pool on an upper floor meant that the existing concrete structure wouldn't need to be demolished. However, additional support was required, and the new construction led to fragmentation that ultimately inspired the design of a spa. One decision led to the next, and in such a way, the project organically developed.

Research also played a role in the design phase. Therefore, it worked well for me that this was a practical investigation, allowing me to use the same method. I proceeded to examine transitions on an increasingly smaller scale, focusing on the function. I studied sequences within the space by visiting projects, such as a swimming pool, and using that knowledge as design tools. Finally, I delved into the smallest scale: materials. The studio's approach of zooming in and out suited this process well.

The constant switching between different aspects, as well as between urban and architectural elements, I found intriguing and learned a lot from. However, I did find the large size of the building challenging at times.

Guidance

Looking back, I recall a very informative period filled with many interesting conversations and discussions. I felt that the tutors understood my vision and always wanted to brainstorm together on how the project could further develop, which always gave me a lot of energy and motivation. For example, initially, I started the design process with the idea of largely demolishing the existing building and constructing something new. However, through interesting talks, I reconsidered my thoughts, allowing my plan to evolve. The same applied to the facade material.

Additionally, the integration of research and design was very valuable. I had great discussions about the implications of moments and how they could be explored and visualized. Alongside that, I enjoyed the group discussions, and I look back positively on the lectures as well; they were highly informative, and I even think there could have been even more.

What I learned

This year, I've gained a lot of new knowledge and experiences, and I look back with a genuine smile. Initially, the site seemed quite overwhelming and the assignment vague, but as time went on, I became intimately familiar with it. This experience has taught me that it's okay for things to evolve, and that you don't need to have everything figured out from day one. For instance, when I didn't have a specific function in mind, it actually opened up new opportunities. So, I particularly appreciated the freedom we had - having the site but still being able to choose our own program. While I discovered that I enjoy working with existing structures, I also realized that I prefer smaller projects. Nonetheless, I truly enjoyed the organic development of the project.

Moreover, I learned that I really enjoy conducting research and using it as a design tool. Transitions were the theme at every step of the design process I undertook, and this helped me a lot. It made me think about light, spatial transitions, warmth, etc. Additionally, I found the analog approach valuable because by drawing, you discover things you might not see with the eyes. It's great for analysis, and I'll take that knowledge with me.

Furthermore, this year, I realized how much I value having such a nice and friendly group. I am truly happy with the studio, and the social aspect has made this a very enjoyable and fun year for me.

All in all, I've had a really great and insightful year. I want to thank my tutors for all the interesting and helpful conversations and for their assistance; I truly appreciate it!