

Reflection Paper

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Creating a Craft Culture: The Royal Academy of Fine Art's School of Textiles

Philosophical Framework

Prior to receiving the brief of the Intimate City, I had a fascination with post-modernisation of many of the metropolitan cities globally. Through the process of globalisation, politically and physically, we have found many cities promoting individualism through a neo-liberal modern architecture at the cost of a loss of a local identity. Moreover, the construction of these buildings, from generally international offices, use construction techniques which are becoming increasingly universalised and generic. In order to combat the sea of indifferent urbanisation, I set my self the intent to design an architecture that respected the values of the context; used local methods of construction; and most importantly, claimed a degree of autonomy in order to become a cultural generator for the city.

This interest in local and contemporary methods of construction led me toward contemplating about the interplay between the lightweight and the heavyweight in the phenomenological experience of tectonics. In contemporary periods of time we know it is impractical and environmentally questionable to create buildings from purely solid masonry. Instead, architects such as Hans Kollhoff¹ advocate for the tectonic visual representation of the structure. For him, it doesn't matter if the entire facade is veneer cladding. The crucial point is that it conveys solidity for the observer. With architects such as Job Floris quoting Posener that "the concept of mass causes the building to belong to the concrete world of objects. As opposed to the technical world of devices. Posener argues that devices induce fear, whereas concrete commands confidence... .. Even if the building no longer consists of massive brickwork, the expression of mass remains useful for it is familiar and gives shelter."² I questioned this point of view. Is there a need for this solid architecture, rather than an environment of technocratic objects? Could a lightweight architecture convey a sense of solidity to the viewer? Is there any need to convey such a classical notion of weight? In order to embark upon this task, I considered working in the tectonic and phenomenological schools of thought pivotal in exploring these questions.

Becoming Intimate with the City

The brief of this year's studio, The Intimate City, set out to question the studio's final year topic of the public institution. At first, I found there seemed to be a contradiction between these two through advocating for the public and private. From reading Richard Sennett's *Fall of the Public Man* I found that through the avocation of intimacy in all of our spaces, the public realm has been lost due to people's fear of revealing oneself. However, on close inspection,

1 H. Kollhoff, *Trouble with Classicists*, [online video], 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHJAol3H42Q> (accessed 04 December 2018)

2 H. Heijden et al., *Post Piraeus* (Alphen aan den Rijn: Vakmedianet, 2017), P. 25

just as light cannot be without shadow, you find that one cannot truly be allowed to develop without the other. For it isn't the intimacy which we are left with in the new developments of our cities, but landscapes of indifference.

To better understand this year's theme, excursions to Paris and Milan allowed for a better understanding of intimacy in relation to Antwerp. Metropolis of Paris portrayed a very public character with its the built environment constructed by Baron Haussmann connecting routes between its nodes of key buildings. This system provided the structure for these grand buildings to host publicity, but also intimacy through their spatial experiences such as light. On a different vein, Milan, largely influenced by Paris, allowed intimacy to enter more into its streets. The façades of their residential buildings - from architects such as Asnago Vender - which are largely apartments, give rise to intimacy in the dialogue of their differences, but also publicness in their concentration of funding and consistency. The project which showed me both intimacy and publicness was St Ambrogio Basilica's entrance courtyard. Open to the sky, its calm light gave me a sense of tranquillity. Yet, this same space also holds community festivities such as flower markets in the square.

Loss of the Crafts

I sought to ground my project in the context of Antwerp through looking towards its arts and craft heritage through its historical guilds, of which some translated to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts today. We find that Linda Loppa, ex-director of the Academy's Fashion School has stated that many senior craftsmen globally are disappearing, causing an emergency for the industry. To tackle this crises and to celebrate the Flemish culture of clothing, I took the task to design a new building for the fashion school, moving it from its location on the upper levels of the MoMu museum, to its own building, called allowing it to be called the Antwerp School of Textiles. Within this building, the school's programme has been expanded to support vocational courses in tailoring, which provide space for craftsmen and more commercial spaces such as a fashion store which invite the general public into ground floor of the building. The two year vocational course in tailoring - which aims to promote a more diverse set of pathways to success in life, contends the importance of higher education that is placed on young individuals. It is complemented by a final year of apprenticeship with the craftsmen in residence. At the heart of this building, resides its hall, which aims to bring these individuals together to form a collective and provide space for events such as runway shows open to the city.

Placing of an Urban Intervention

Initially I found it difficult to fuse together the brief with my initial ambitions and translate into a worthwhile thesis. In many ways the brief was advocating the precisely the type of architecture that I was aiming to question. The site surroundings I was given, the fashion district, is a heavily built up area within the metropolitan city of Antwerp. However, with the insurgence of international fashion brands and often rare lightweight pieces of architecture, I found an avenue to start my work.

I found that Antwerp's rising popularity to the international level had the potential to weaken the identity of the fashion scene of the city. I proposed to create an architecture that mediated between the local and global scales through locating the project on the boundary between the more international fashion stores and the local ones. The building, appearingly modest in its location on vleminkveld straat, presents itself in an introverted manner. Situated in the middle of the urban block, it is not placed on a corner or in front of a square which usually sought after locations. While considered a public building due to it being an educational institution, there are many private spaces for students which are restricted to the public. Unlike a more widely accessible institution on the corner, this project provides an example to creating architecture which does not have a pivotal axial position in the urban fabric. Instead, this withdrawal allows for the possibility for a more intimate creative community to grow and work together, which is part of the city and also a miniature city of its own. Due to this sense of community, I found that rather than becoming a 'contextual' architecture, the building also had to exhibit qualities or characteristics that allowed itself to present some form of autonomy. This is inherently important for the pride in a public building. These structures used by the collective also have a need to assert autonomy in order to promote a sense of civic pride and becoming a public institution in-bedded in the city.

Moulding an Autonomous Architecture

The project aims to tackle the loss of the public through the change in society, as argued by Richard Sennett, and the loss of intimate spaces for all through much of recent urban design. Using the St Ambrogio's courtyard as a exemplar, I created a designed a public room which provided both publicness and intimacy, as well as exploring notions of tectonics in its expression. Moreover, from my research of buildings within mega-blocks I found that the majority formed courtyard spaces in order to allow light into the building. From these two sets of precedents, a multitude of massing studies, and exploration through drawing, I arrived at a massing solution of a building with one large courtyard. As daylighting was a major design factor, this massing allows light to penetrate into much of the more public ground floor level. This monastic form provides enclosure for the users and has links to the origins of universities, including that of the Hof Van Liere.

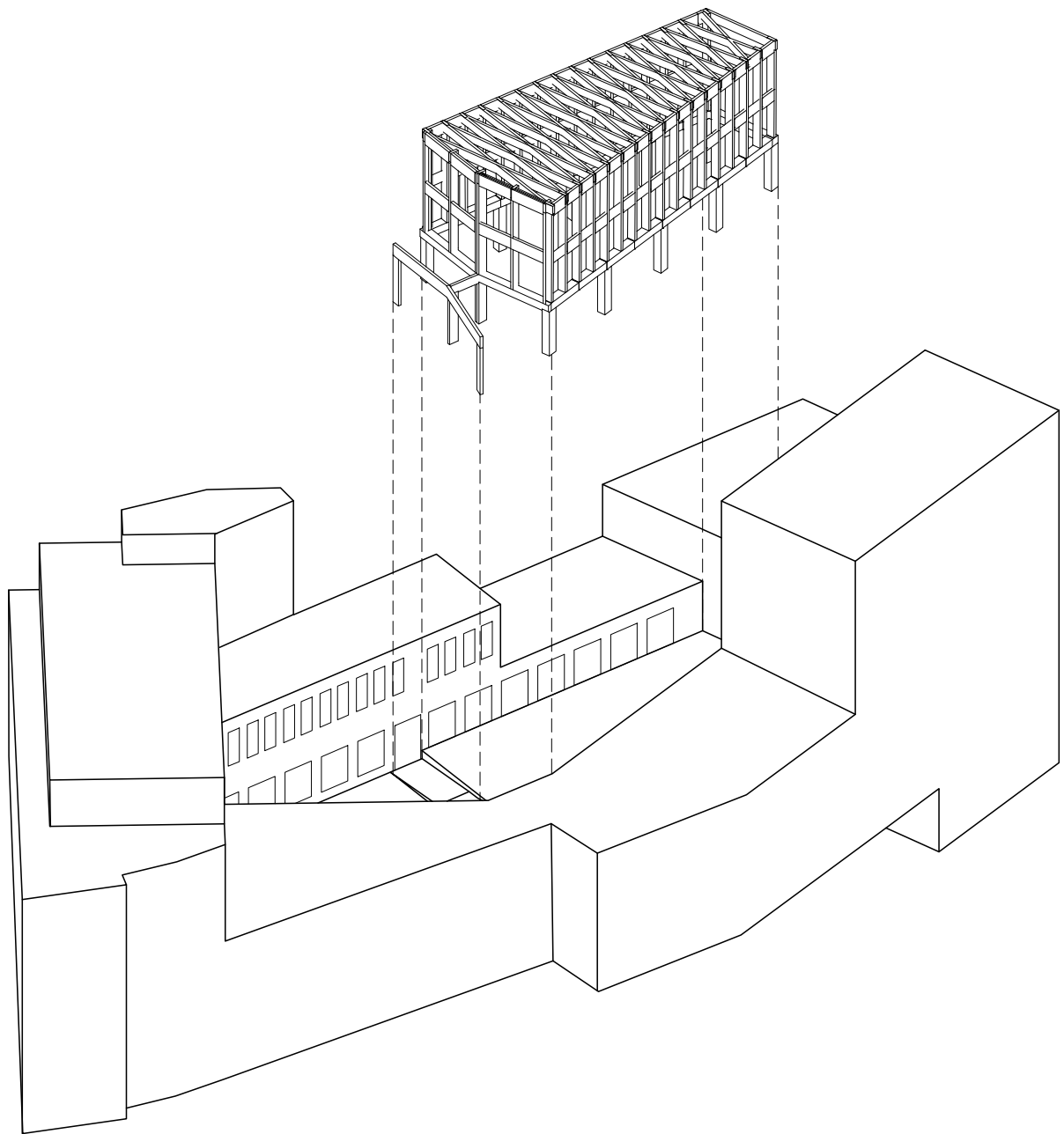


Fig 1. The hall sitting inside the courtyard

To provide a space of gathering for festivities and shelter for the building's creative community, a lightweight hall has been placed to rest inside the courtyard. This hall helps to subdivide the courtyard from a monumental space into two. This layering and division of space creates an ambiguity between the one and two courtyards that is reminiscent of the Palais Royal - where it has one overall courtyard, divided into three courtyards through colonnade walkways. The articulation of the form of the lightweight structure of the hall evokes the appearance of a (greek) temple, which have strong connotations towards gathering.

Experiencing the space

Due to its introverted nature and unusual public entrance, the building aims to strike a precarious balance between intimacy and publicness. Although the proposed massing of the building closes the urban block at the front, the school aims to extend the city's public domain by inviting passersby via a large grand entrance. This threshold leads the user through a ramped dark passage with windows on either side. While walking through, they are greeted by a bright light of open air courtyard space, which acts as a gathering point before one enters the building. These changing lighting conditions extend to the hall behind, where the mood is more serene.

To strengthen the ambiguity between inside and outside, the ground floor is layered by a corridor and rhythms of columns which create concentric of zones in plan. The building is further fragmented through the different levels on the ground floor to create different spaces.

Materiality

The principle materiality of the courtyard building is a hard durable shell made predominantly of brick, with a soft, interior made predominantly of timber. Inside of this, the hall is made of glue-laminated timber and clad with aluminium. In order to look to the past and the future, the traditional material of timber is combined with the contemporary application of a glu-lam structure and clt flooring. Many of the remaining timber buildings of Antwerp, such as the Hof Van Liere and the Plantin Moretus, have a hard shell exterior and a soft intimate interior. By constructing the hall out of timber, intimacy is invited into what could appearingly be quite a monumental space. These two together allude to notions of durability and ephemerality in the context of fashion and the contemporary society.

This focus on craft calls for the need the architecture of the building to present aspects of monumentality in order to sustain a strong appearance to its users and the wider public. For the composition of the facade, the building is tied together through datums. For the ground floor, the flemish bond is interlocked at the corners of the walls and protruding every other row. Window openings are wider on this level to increase this sense of commerciality. To reveal the underlying structure, bricks are recessed on the base and body of the facade where the columns are behind. On the upper levels, this recess is inversed evoke the image of a crown. The roof of the hall has overlapping beams which point towards notions of weaving, helping to strengthen its textile culture.

Sustainability

The sustainable construction of the building was a key part to my project, as a means to work as a commentary on the wasteful clothing industry. As such I took measures to reduce carbon emissions and to provide the potential of dismantling in the future. Concrete was only used from the ground level datum downwards, allowing a glu-lam timber frame structure to sit on top of it. The majority of this structure is wrapped with local flemish bricks which use limestone mortar. Moreover, the climate of the building has been addressed to reduce the heating and cool the building in the appropriate period of time during the year, such as using a water source heat pump.

Weight

Through the initial focus on the phenomenological perception of lightweight and heavyweight, I was able to translate this to the concept of the project to strengthen the festive and community spirit in the centre. It is clear what the focal point for the building and the public that are invited inwards. One of my intents was to play with the phenomenological perception of architecture through its representation of weight. The use of large glu-lam columns for the base of the public room and bricks for its walls play with conventional norms where normally a material of a higher density would be used. While a lighter element, glu-lam column takes the role of the primary structure from masonry and steel, with the latter being the most prevalent in our current times. Although brick has been seen traditionally as a stronger element than timber, the application of laminating beams has brought upon the unusual circumstance where timber is capable competing in strength with brick. Through the implementation of lightweight structures in contrast to the heavy weight structures, I believe I have created an architecture that strikes a balance between the traditional culture of Antwerp and something more modern.

For the future

For the remaining part of the my graduation I will delve deeper into the details of the project by creating more and refining the existing ones, while make sure that they compliment my design intentions. I will make sure that the routing from the entrance to the workshop is realised through perspectives, as well as create more drawings such as axonometrics which can fully show off the building three dimensionally. Finally, I will make a 1:33 model of the hall, my city room, that illustrates the technical and design aspects of my project together in one physical manifestation.