

# P5 REFLECTION

## INTERIORS BUILDINGS CITIES

MSC3|4 GRADUATION STUDIO 'PALACE'  
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## Introduction

This reflection paper is reflecting upon the relationship between the research, design and the chosen approach of the project. The relation between the research and the design will be subdivided and reflected upon under the different themes of research that took place over time. The approach of the research, which was mostly set out by the studio itself, but was very open towards the personal interpretation of the different students, will be reflected upon in the conclusion.

### I Brussels: a heterogeneous city

The graduation studio started with a visit, with the whole Interiors Buildings Cities chair, to Brussels. Brussels is this year's context of the chair and because of this, also our graduation studio. "Brussels is the capital city of both Belgium and the European Union; a city with a complex history, distinct identities tied to language, others attached to its great diversity, and another identity pertaining to the imposition of 'zones' dedicated to the European Union." (Pimlott, 2019, pp. 2)

From the start, we learned that Brussels' character and charm is defined by its diversity. After Dubai, Brussels is the city with the highest percentage of residents from foreign origins according to the world migration report of 2015 (Douieb, 2020). About 60 percent of its 1.2 million residents were born non-Belgian, a lovely melting pot where minorities are the rule rather than the exception. NoAarchitecten told us upon arrival during their presentation that markets are special come together places in Brussels. A place where all minorities of Brussels come together. Our first trip ended at the Midi Market of Brussels, Brussels biggest market. While eating a Moroccan pancake on an improvised terrace, nestled between the market stalls, I observed the crowd, young, old, different nationalities, different languages, all coming together for a shared commonality, a delicious dish.

Upon return, we as a group mapped the city of Brussels at different scales. This helped us get a better understanding of the city's history, culture, public space, politics and infrastructure. Followed up was research towards different activism groups in Brussels. Shaoqi Zhang and I decided to do research towards Cultureghem, an organization that is focussed on the cultivation of urban space. This started with the re-use of the halls of the former slaughterhouse of Anderlecht-Kuregem, which lies in a neighborhood where over 170 nationalities live. Cultureghem tries to connect people, regardless of origin or cultural background through their daily needs: play and food. Shaoqi and I made axonometric drawings of their event, the Kookmet. During the Kookmet, volunteers give cooking classes to kids from different schools. Here they learn to cook with waste food, food that was about to be thrown away at the market because the market owners didn't sell it. This theme of togetherness and waste food is something I tried to take to the next step of my research and later on towards my design.

### II A political space

The next step in our research was to design a political space. This was our first exercise where we tried to relate politics and design. I continued by working on the themes of markets, waste food and togetherness. This resulted in a waste food canteen contextualized in a market. At the end of each market day, market holders could instead of throwing their unsold food away, exchange it for meal coupons at the canteen. The excess food was used for cooking cheap delicious meals. The

rest of the unsold food would eventually be stalled outside the canteen and can be taken away for free, for those who have nothing to spend. The canteen fights food going to waste and tries to bring the people of Brussels together by distributing cheap delicious meals. The ordering and consuming of the meals all happen in the public domain. Tables and seats are placed around the canteen where you can enjoy your meal and have a conversation with the people surrounded by you.

This research through design exercise set out new themes which set the base for my design project. This idea of a canteen that cooks with waste food is something that I directly copied into the canteen of my own project. But it also made me think about a more circular approach for my project. Circularity is a big theme in Brussels. In 2007, buildings were still responsible for 72 percent of the CO2 emission. Since March 2016, the Regional Programme for a Circular Economy has been committed to a change of direction. Energy efficiency and renewability, environmental impact, feasibility and repeatability, and architectural and urban quality. This program quickly won a prize, but according to Lionel Devlieger of Rotor (2019, pp. 56) is a lot of construction waste still going in the wrong direction. European legislation says that 60 percent of construction waste should be re-used or recycled. This, however, is a vital distinction. "Reuse means that all of the building components, such as tiles and facade elements and the like are repaired and made ready for reuse. This labour-intensive process creates jobs for low-skilled workers. This is exactly what the region needs. Recycling destroys materials and then processes them in other industrial applications. This is of little benefit at the local level." (Devlieger, 2019, pp. 56) This made me aware that the focus should be placed on reuse, not on recycling.

### III Brucity

The newly constructed administrative centre for the city of Brussels, Brucity, is currently under construction. This is being done at the original site of Parking 58, a parking garage, originally built for the Expo in Brussels in 1958. Parking 58 has been demolished to make way for Brucity. Brucity is a completely new building. This approach doesn't contain any form of circularity. I think that it's weird that the city of Brussels sets out a program that encourages circularity but doesn't participate in it itself. The newly constructed administrative centre could have served as an example for the future and give a boost for companies working in circularity. "The project manifests itself as a developers block with a generic facade. Descriptions of truly public space within the project, however, are completely undefined." (Pimlott, 2019, pp. 3)

### IV A people's Palace

As a critique on Brucity, a new city hall has been designed that is aiming to be more than an administrative centre. A project that takes the shape of a people's palace. A place where local citizens can engage with the administration and governance of the city on different levels. A series of precedents has been studied in the research phase. This research gave insights about the relation of politics and buildings, governance and the public and the definition of a people's palace. Victor Horta's Maison de Peuple, which was built in Brussels in 1895, for example, showed me how a public interior of a people's palace could serve the citizens of a city. More contemporary projects like the renovation of Palais de Tokyo in Paris and Ecole d'Architecture, both by Lacaton & Vassal, show ways how

existing and newly constructed structures can be embraced and habituated.

Different briefs through the semester, combined with my own personal focus on circularity that I set during the research phase, have been used to design a building that aims to be a people's palace. I choose to deviate from the given plot by reusing an existing apartment block which lays between the given plot and the boulevard Anspach. This connects the new city hall with the boulevard Anspach, the main axe which runs through the centre of Brussels and that is often associated with strolling and leisurement. The existing incast concrete skeleton of the apartment block will be reused. Interventions in the skeleton have been made to change its shape within the new context and create new spaces. Against the existing structure, a new concrete skeleton is placed to add extra volume and to create spaces which didn't fit in the existing skeleton. This skeleton partly fills up the hole, which originally has been dug for the parking garage of Brucity. The facade of the existing apartment block will be dismantled, made ready for use, and re-used in the project.

## **V Material Measures**

One can not neglect the environmental impact a building like this has while we find ourselves in a climate crisis. Therefore I did research towards the impact of concrete, the chosen construction material, on the environment. "Concrete has been a very versatile and durable material for replicating natural stone for over a century. This unfortunately comes with a price. The production of concrete comes with a high emission of CO<sub>2</sub> gas. Concrete is the third-largest contributor to carbon dioxide emissions, after automobiles and coal-fuelled power plants. Cement manufacturing alone is responsible for roughly 5% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Concrete also makes up the largest proportion of construction and demolition waste, and represents about a third of all the landfill waste." (Bennet, 2005 pp.8) This research made me aware of the consequences of the use of concrete. It eventually made me reduce the amount of concrete that I used in the design as much as possible. My well clad facade was replaced by a demountable and reusable curtain facade. The skeleton of the project has been precast, which reduces the CO<sub>2</sub> emission because of the minimization of waste. More research has been conducted towards the circularity of concrete construction elements. By applying dry connections, the skeleton can be mounted, and more importantly, demounted on site. This allows the elements to have a second life after the lifespan of the building.

## **VI Relation between research and design**

The different types of research helped me shape the design themes of my project in a very natural way. My ambitions regarding reuse started small by designing a canteen that cooks with unsold market food. This eventually made me design a circular building consisting of prefabricated elements which are mountable and demountable through dry connections. This was an effective approach which suited me well. The scale of the building felt very overwhelming a lot of times during the design process. By starting with a small gesture, I was able to translate my beliefs into a bigger scale over time. The studied precedents gave me a good understanding of what to design. It made me think about the different elements, spaces and their measurements, the public common meeting ground and the overall appearance of a people's palace. They

offered great help while working through the different scales of the project.

The design could be relevant in the bigger framework of circularity. It can be used as an example of how an existing concrete structure and a sandstone facade can be reused. It also serves as an example for the design of a newly produced skeleton, that becomes circular by making it demountable and ready for a second use.

Sources:

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