

## Reflection Paper

### **GATHERING GROUNDS:**

#### The Architecture of Invitation



Family dinner (photograph supplied by author)

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## LOW TOWN DOWN TOWN

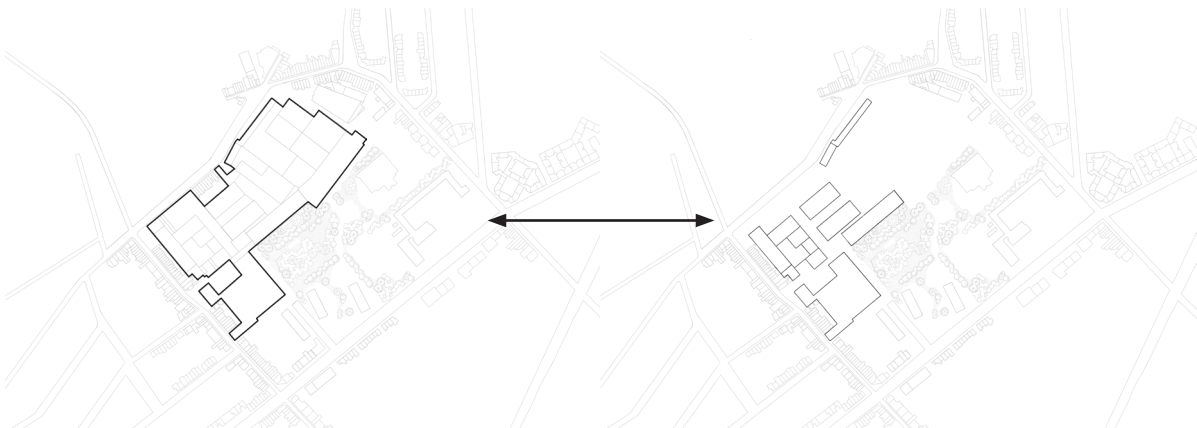
The Urban Architecture graduation studio of this year, titled ‘Low Town Down Town’, focuses on the evolving urban fabric of the Lageweg site, located in the southern periphery of Antwerp. The site exists within the layered context of the “Halfway City,” where suburban structures are gradually transforming into a new kind of urbanity. The studio explores how architecture can mediate the transition of the Lageweg area, where industrial heritage, residential typologies, and polder ecologies intersect.

Students are encouraged to engage with the site at multiple scales: from the micro-scale of touching the ground, to the macro-scale of observing the site within the broader urban system of Antwerp. This multiscalar approach enables a deeper understanding of the interactions between various spatial, ecological, and social dynamics at play.

## BLIKFABRIEK

The Lageweg site surrounds a former can factory, the Blikfabriek, now largely vacant and in a state of decay. The complex consists of multiple large-scale industrial halls varying in size, construction methods, age, and condition. Due to years of abandonment, new occupants, both human and non-human, have begun to take over. The walls are covered with graffiti, overgrown with plants, and inhabited by nesting birds.

Yet, among the ruins, some structures have recently been reclaimed by grassroots initiatives aiming to create communal spaces. After an initial site investigation, student groups of three were tasked with developing a masterplan for the Lageweg area. One of the initial challenges was deciding which buildings to preserve and which to demolish. Some structures held aesthetic value, while others were more structurally robust. However, the sheer mass and positioning of the Blikfabriek halls formed an impenetrable barrier across the site. Partial demolition was therefore necessary to enable the transformation from ‘low town’ to ‘downtown.’



## RESEARCH

The research phase began under the theme ‘Low High Up Down’, which focused on situating the Lageweg site within the larger context of Antwerp. These weeks involved extensive fieldwork, often requiring travel across the city by various means to assess spatial relationships and socio-economic contrasts. Comparisons emerged naturally: while the city centre might be viewed as ‘elite,’ Lageweg is perceived as ‘working-class’; while Nieuw-Zuid is ‘expensive,’ Lageweg appears ‘affordable.’

My initial impression of Lageweg was marked by its lifelessness in contrast to the vibrancy of other Antwerp neighborhoods. Shuttered windows, closed doors, and empty streets prompted a question: where is everyone? This observation sparked my interest in the everyday routines of the local population. Where do social interactions take place? Are they mostly confined to the private realm? And if so, what does that mean for experiences of community and hospitality? These questions weren’t limited to the Lageweg context, they also resonated with my personal life. Growing up in a household shared by three generations of women (my grandmother, mother, and me), I began to reflect on how our experiences of daily life and space diverged.

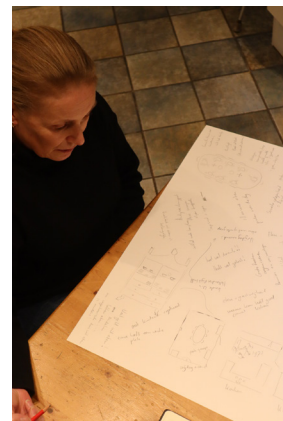


## METHOD

Initial research in Hoboken began with close observation. I spent a Monday morning at a local café, listening in on conversations and observing market-goers in their routines. The familiarity between the staff and customers suggested a tight-knit, regular clientele. Despite being in a foreign city, the experience echoed that of my own local café back home.

This personal connection encouraged me, under the guidance of my mentor, to delve deeper into my own lived experiences. I began using visual mapping to represent the differences in daily routines between myself, my mother, and my grandmother. As these visualizations became more detailed, the element of space emerged as a critical factor. I noticed stark differences between the transitions within my home and those observed at Lageweg.

The word that best captured this difference was ‘gastvrijheid’, or hospitality. My mentors suggested that this concept should be translated to the Lageweg context. I continued working with visual mapping and produced a catalogue of ‘gastvrije’ façades—documented during a walk through Lageweg and Hoboken. By comparing ‘less hospitable’ and ‘more hospitable’ façades, I distilled specific design elements that could help foster a sense of welcome. This marked the bridge between my research and the beginning of my design proposal.



## DESIGN

The resulting project, Gathering Grounds, is a spatial assembly designed to encourage community interaction. The intervention includes a public square, a repurposed industrial building converted into office space, and a newly designed residential block.

In accordance with the masterplan, the plinths around the square accommodate public programs such as cafés, shops, bakeries, and restaurants, functions that actively invite social gathering. Additional design interventions, such as the integration of seating and staircases into the public realm, reinforce the principle of the Gathering Grounds.

Drawing from the research, specific architectural elements were incorporated to enhance the *gastvrijheid* of the built environment. A key finding was the importance of recognizability: façades should clearly communicate their function and allow visitors to intuitively locate entrances. This sense of spatial clarity plays a fundamental role in creating inviting environments.

Additionally, the intergenerational routines uncovered during research informed the housing typologies. Each floor offers a distinct layout, accommodating singles, couples, families, and residents of all ages, embracing the diversity of daily life.



## ASSESSMENT

Reflecting on the research process, the project's initial focus lay in mapping intergenerational routines, which gradually expanded into an exploration of how different users experience space. This led to the thematic core of *gastvrijheid*, which guided the architectural approach.

However, much of the early research was introspective, grounded in personal experience rather than direct engagement with the Lageweg site. This imbalance became evident in feedback sessions, prompting a shift toward a more site-specific investigation. Questions like “Why are some houses more hospitable than others?” helped contextualize the findings and allowed for a deeper architectural response.

In hindsight, starting the research from a personal lens proved to be a useful tool to shape the investigation, but it also posed a risk of staying too close to familiar ground. Constructive feedback encouraged me to look outward, incorporating both the social reality and the urban fabric of Lageweg. As a result, the final design draws strength from a dual foundation: personal insight and contextual relevance.

The core principles derived from this research, ‘*gastvrijheid*’, routine, intergenerationally—now serve as a meaningful framework for this specific urban case study.