

Urban Architecture Graduation Studio | *Low Town Downtown*

REFLECTION

Carolina Bongiorno
6064337

Main mentor / Architecture: Elsbeth Ronner
Second mentor / Building Technology: Jos Lafeber
Third mentor / Research: Chiara Pradel

The project begins with the site, considered the richest field of investigation from which to draw directions for research and design action.

Lageweg, located in the post-industrial neighborhood of Hoboken on the southern periphery of Antwerp, immediately revealed itself as a liminal space, suspended between marginality and potential.

Situated within a fragmented and transitional urban context, it currently represents a threshold between the consolidated city and a transforming periphery that has never been fully integrated. At its core is an abandoned factory, inactive since the 1970s, which has become an urban void, both physically and symbolically. Over time, this space has accumulated traces of spontaneous, informal, and temporary reactivations. Today, the partially abandoned areas and industrial buildings need to be reimagined to better meet the needs of the community.

process as a knowledge tool

From the outset, the layered complexity of this place asked for a process of deep understanding, which evolved into a continuous investigation and a critical reinterpretation of its characteristics, with the goal of formulating an architectural response that is strongly rooted in its specificities.

The entire design journey unfolded in successive phases, each of which called for different methodologies, involving multiple actors and tools. Just as in professional processes, each stage raised new questions, redefined priorities, and activated meaningful collaborations with peers and tutors, who brought diverse views and expertise.

collective lens

The first phase of the work was dedicated to building a shared knowledge on the site through collective research. The gathered material was organized into seven key themes, each assigned to a group responsible for offering a personal, thematic reinterpretation. Each group explored a specific dimension of the site - physical, social, historical, ecological - allowing for unexpected connections.

Through the theme of the “Material Garden of Gift and Waste,” we proposed our reinterpretation of the Blikfabriek, a temporary occupation supported by the community and institutional donations. This place, with its highly distinctive character, is currently a meeting point between work, leisure, and creativity, offering alternative modes of interaction with the city and its resources.

We used the metaphor of a garden to map Blikfabriek both as a physical place and as a system of material and social relations. The goal was to reflect on themes such as the site’s enclosure and its role as safe haven, the dynamics of care and maintenance of spaces and materials, the seasonal rhythms that characterize its life cycle, and the social networks that emerge through material exchange.

In this phase, fieldwork played a crucial role: direct observations, photographic documentation, redrawing the existing, and informal conversations with the site’s users helped to build situated and concrete knowledge. An equally important aspect was the in-depth research of references and images, which converged into the final research product.

The product was presented to a wider audience during the first exhibition. This moment was particularly stimulating: in the weeks leading up to it, a productive dialogue with the tutors had been established, helping us to broaden the perspective on more topics. The decision of how to represent our findings led us to experiment with a personal visual language, creating an exhibition piece based on an interpretive drawing and a series of visual suggestions. However, the result turned out to be more open-ended and conceptual than expected: feedback highlighted that our presentation was cryptic for those viewing the work for the first time. This interaction provided me with an opportunity to reflect on the importance of tailoring language to the context and audience. It was an important lesson on balancing expressiveness and communicative clarity.

The overall collaboration between groups and the methodological fragmentation of this phase proved successful for me. It allowed individual readings to overlap and provided a representation of the site that was not objective, but multifaceted, in which subjective interpretations were integrated into a more articulated

understanding.

A complex and contradictory reality like Lageweg, perhaps, can only be grasped through this overlap of partial viewpoints, which only together can get close to the truth of the place.

designing with multiple voices

The first design phase was a natural continuation of the collective work. Once again, the process was driven by collaboration, this time with two fellow students, with whom I combined perspectives to develop a masterplan for the intervention area. The masterplan emerged from interweaving our perspectives, united by a set of guiding principles that we consistently upheld throughout the process: openness, identity and balance.

Once again, it was the site itself that guided our choices. We did not follow a predetermined plan but responded to the critical issues and potentials that emerged during our exploration. The absence of a rigid vision allowed the masterplan to develop in an open and gradual way, shaped by the context's demands.

I found it particularly meaningful to tackle this phase collaboratively, not only due to the complexity and scale of the area, but also because it reflected truthful dynamics of design practice.

personal lens

Alongside the collective design phase, the synthesis of emerging themes allowed me to identify the fascinations that influenced my project.

Lageweg appeared to me as a fragmented mosaic of structures and functions: despite hosting a variety of uses, from residential to industrial, from logistics to education, the predominance of productive activities and the rigidity of its physical boundaries have gradually limited opportunities for encounter and exchange.

In an attempt to define my personal lens for reinterpreting Lageweg, I began my individual research focusing on its spatial and programmatic discontinuity. From there, the investigation turned toward the possibility that heterogeneous functions, living, producing, learning, etc., might not only coexist within the

same perimeter, but also mutually activate each other through meaningful relationships.

To explore this theme, I expanded my research to broader theoretical and design fields, delving into questions such as the definition of function and multifunctionality, weak or punctual architecture, the relationship between building and program, non-functional spaces, and the dynamics that unfold between objects, edges, and connections. A selection of texts, projects, artworks, and drawings, guided this initial exploration, helping me build a theoretical framework to refer to.

References were an important starting point for me, like invisible interlocutors to engage with. However, at first, it was difficult to narrow down a specific interest within the wide scope of emerging topics. The conversations with my tutor were valuable in raising questions, highlighting critical issues, and strengthening the need to identify a personal lens through which to read the site.

If theoretical readings initially offered comfort and affinity, real progress came when I began to critically rework them, putting them into dialogue with the site's specificities. I progressively narrowed my focus, concentrating on spatial devices capable of generating interactions and tensions. In particular, I turned my attention to boundaries, not as sharp lines but as spaces with depth, places of negotiation. I started to interpret points of contact and friction within the site, recognizing friction not as an obstacle but as an architectural condition capable of generating new possibilities for use, relationships, and meaning.

Fieldwork was my primary source of information. I visited the site multiple times, documenting it through photographs, sketches, and conversations with its users. It was not easy to identify a single method to approach the topic, which is why I experimented with various strategies, from drawing to physical models, from mapping to photographic suggestions, in an attempt to develop a personal language.

Being open to tools not traditionally used in architecture helped deepen my understanding of the site. Although this methodological freedom initially generated uncertainty about my interests and expressive language - sometimes perceived as too implicit or abstract - it was also an opportunity to engage

with alternative modes of communication and to strengthen my confidence in more familiar tools, such as architectural drawing and theoretical reflection. In a group rich with strong voices and immediate languages, this path helped me regain confidence in my own expressive identity and interests.

from research to design practice

The beginning of the design phase marked the moment when all the threads of my research began to intertwine in a concrete way. It was the point at which the themes explored during theoretical investigation, insights from collective work, impressions gathered during site visits and excursions, and the studied design references started to take on a tangible form.

The project emerged from engaging with a specific portion of the site, defined by existing buildings and established physical boundaries. From the start, I questioned the spatial and symbolic implications of this condition: *what frictions exist between the existing volumes? What types of relationships do they establish? Is there hidden potential in these tensions? And how can the existing limits be transformed into design resources?*

This reflection helped me identify elements of the site with untapped potential, as well as areas that needed rethinking and transformation. My project begins with these transitional spaces, aiming to break free from the site's closed, monofunctional nature and turn it into an integrated place.

The choice to work on a site characterized by a repurposed industrial building now functioning as a school led me to reflect on themes of care, growth, and learning. Defining the program was one of the most complex and stimulating aspects. I aimed to construct it not as a sum of functions but as an articulated system of temporal and spatial relationships.

From this vision, the idea emerged for a new school building that also includes a residential addition, offering the opportunity to experiment with forms of interaction between them.

During this phase, the project became more concrete and operational. The tutoring sessions helped me identify key aspects and refine the design direction. The introduction of technical aspects further solidified the project. Defining the

construction system, materials, and environmental strategies led to adjustments that grounded the project in reality.

A key aspect of this moment was learning to manage the complexity of the project over time. Balancing ideas, ambitions, and expectations with deadlines and presentations required continuous selection and synthesis.

next steps

Although this document reflects on the conclusion of the process, I recognize that the final phase of my work has yet to be fully completed.

I intend to dedicate the remaining time to strengthening the connection between the various phases and their translation into the final project, making the narrative behind the design clearer and more legible. This specifically means refining representation tools to build more effective communication. Through physical models, drawings, and visualizations, I will try to more precisely highlight how the central themes that emerged during the research materialize in the project, such as the use of the corridors as active spatial devices that structure rhythms and connections within the building, and the design of the outdoor urban space through architectural elements that frame and define its use.

In parallel, I plan to refine and deepen certain design elements, to ensure that all parts of the project are cohesively tied together.

relevance

The aim of the project was never to deliver a definitive answer, but rather to initiate a sensitive design process capable of remaining attentive to the place and its material, social, and cultural dimensions.

This experience taught me that architecture is, above all, an exercise in sensitivity. It is a form of personal expression that should never be self-referential: it must always engage with and be balanced by the external conditions that shape it. To design is not to impose, but to engage in dialogue. It means being able to read the layers of a context, to embrace its complexities and contradictions, and to translate them into sensitive design choices.