

Report

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Interiors Buildings Cities

Community Crafts Centre

In the beginning of the year, a first assignment helped in obtaining an interpretation on the concept of intimacy. The result of this was an idea of intimacy in architecture as a place where one can feel intimate and comfortable within oneself as well as with others. It is also a space that is a result of the collective identity, both in its uses and in its materialisation.

An Institution for the Intimate City is therefore interpreted as a place for the Everyday, a place for the ordinary, that people can identify with and feel represented by; at the same time it also becomes a platform for the community to further develop and strengthen their identity.

Since an Institution is the architectural outcome of this idea, and because of the notion of artifacts as being the product of their culture and time, a crafts centre was proposed as an Intimate Institution for the city of Antwerp.

This is also well inserted in the current Belgian panorama, as an ever growing interest in the concept of the Productive City sees great efforts being made to bring the making industry back to the city centres, with the final aim of having flexible cities with multiple programmes offering a variegated experience.

The history of Antwerp also supports the relevance of this programme. The city has in fact enriched throughout the centuries thanks to the work of its Guilds and its craftsmanship, later growing thanks to its commerce and its industrial focus.

The project is therefore located in the North of Antwerp, a historically industrial area, where the old harbour and factories stand.

A trail of industrial heritage can be seen throughout these neighbourhoods, with the warehouses and the factories shaping the atmospherical quality of this part of the city.

Visiting the specific neighbourhood of 2060, in Antwerp 'T Noord, it became clear that the crafts centre would have to offer more than one programme. The proposal therefore became for a community centre with a focus on crafts. This allowed for a more vibrant and flexible programme, where multiple things could happen at the same time in different parts of the building, offering a more powerful platform for the community to gather in a more intimate environment. This kind of institution also fit well with the necessities of the municipality.

The specific project location is positioned in between two different realities: a very wide, landscaped area as opposed to a more dense, highly built neighbourhood. On site are three industrial heritage elements, the Factory, the wall and the chimney, which are protected by the municipality and which create a starting point for the project, already offering a strongly productive atmosphere to the building.

The neighbourhood also sees a very rhythmic change in scale of its buildings, from factories to typical Belgian housing, creating dynamism in an otherwise rigid grid of blocks.

These considerations resulted in a masterplan for the project that tries to make the neighbourhood more porous, opening new paths through the big block and creating a filtering experience between the extremely big park on one side and the densely built environment on the other.

The volume follows the rhythmic quality of the neighbourhood facades, being composed of different elements of different heights, that patch together the building with the surroundings and with the heritage elements.

Visits to existing community centres were made, to understand the necessities of such places better. These confirmed the idea that a flexible space that offers a great variety of programmes works better at creating a unifying experience that would make the building work and be activated all day every day. The programme was therefore disposed according to the characteristics of the immediate surroundings.

A gallery at the centre of the building made so that the fragmented volume and ensemble would join together through this instrument, surrounding an interior courtyard. Along this gallery, a multiplicity of urban living rooms, as well as the main city room, creates rhythm in the public route of the building.

A study on the courtyard typology and its historical relevance for the city of Antwerp was therefore made, understanding it and inserting it better.

The design of the building was made following certain criteria that were laid out during the initial phases and assignments of the year. The main aim was to obtain an atmosphere of intimacy, interpreted as comfort. This was then achieved through the instruments of Geometry, Materiality and Identity.

In the plans, a sense of sequences through the space was the main purpose. A series of filtering experiences and different views makes so that the user eases into the building, discovering bit by bit this fragmented entity, until understanding it as a

whole, as it happens with a city. The project tries to identify architecture not as a static object, but a series of places that you take time to experience and which therefore create a stronger atmosphere.

In section, the building makes use of the basilica typology to obtain a sense of simultaneity. The intimacy is therefore created through spaces that make you feel you are hidden in your niche, while at the same time you are part of a wider more public environment, addressing the double nature of the concept.

In its materiality, the building takes great inspiration from its immediate surroundings and the industrial heritage. Regarding the industrial typology, the contrast between thick and robust masonry walls with the slimmer and apparently more light steel structures acts as a starting point for the material culture strategy of the project. A tendency to create this great contrast between these two elements is also encountered in a multiplicity of restoration projects, making it a highly powerful way to deal with the existing in the instance of my project as well.

A series of typologies and elements were therefore developed starting from the architecture of the city room, creating a gallery typology that is then reflected in the entirety of the courtyard gallery. The contrast between the thin steel interior gallery of the city room and its thick masonry perimeter walls is then mirrored to the entirety of the building, which is made of a steel frame structure then clad in bricks, with the same steel gallery typology surrounding the interior courtyard.

The main steel structure, together with the steel gallery, railings, window frames and gates created then composes a trail of metal throughout the building, juxtaposed to the background of masonry of brick or concrete blocks, that unifies the building as a whole and makes it recognisable as one entity.

This is also evident in the main facades, which take inspiration from the surroundings for the same purpose: that of making the building recognisable as belonging to the neighbourhood in its material feel. The purpose of this is for the community to feel familiar with the building since the first experience, therefore being more open to a comfortable feeling inside it.

The transition of spaces is then also reflected through the entering of the building, going from a brick outer public facade towards a steel interior facade, with a number of elements easing this transition through the interiors.

In the end, the focus of this project ended up being reflective of the results of the experience in Naples in the first phase of the year. The notions of geometry, materiality and identity were tackled in this research phase in a perhaps unconscious way, and came back throughout the project to obtain the main purposes of an Intimate Institution: that of being an organic part of the existing city, a stratification of the existing urban fabric; offering a fragmented experience of glimpses that ameliorates the life of the building through its flexibility and multitude of programmes, but which then feels like a unified and porous entity; and that of the building being a direct response to the collective identity of its inhabitants, a product of its cultural and physical context and of its time.