

Reflection Paper

(Out of the) Ordinary:

Towards an intimate portrait of the city

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On Glaneurs et Glaneuses

The Urban Architecture graduation studio theme, *Glaneurs et Glaneuses*, was unfamiliar to me before starting. Originally skeptical how this term would relate to current architectural practice, Agnes Varda's documentary, however, illustrated the different roles a Glaneurs can take on or form into. In turn, challenging the current role of architects. As architects, we become gleaners, gathering from tangible and intangible leftovers. My research continued to delve further into this after P2 as I looked into the architect as a director, speculator and storyteller. The term has become central in my design process, always orienting back to existing material and urban fabrics. It is a lens which I have progressively ingrained in my architectural position as it values existing context and celebrates a multi-disciplinary and wholistic approach to architecture.

On site

The studio aims to engage with existing conditions of medium-size urban sites, investigating qualities of buildings which are concealed at first glance. The site-specific studio, in this case, Sappi Factory and surroundings, in Maastricht. This approach was adopted into the collective urban proposal, where we observed and examined the existing urban tissue of the Sappi Factory. Our approach, retaining the majority of buildings based on a set of principles, while introducing new volumes, helped us develop a system where 'tabula rasa' methods are opposed and a contextually sensitive relationship between old and new is created. These acts deal with vacant structures as an act of sustainability. As *Glaneurs et Glaneuses*, we worked successfully as a group of three (Georgia Xypolia, Frederic Hormesch and I). We were able to produce a clarity in the project through working at different scales and media, all working with each other's strengths. We collaboratively facilitated the transition from the urban (collective) to architectural (individual) to technical scale through discussions during the entire length of the graduation studio.

On design

The selected part of the proposal is the design of a new residential neighborhood. Originally, the aim was to tackle an ensemble of 5 buildings to create interweaving programs and 'an enlarged model of a traditional community center'. This approach, however, was quickly narrowed due to the large scale and limited time. Critique received during P2 was the impractical design of a full public plinth. The challenge was, to investigate how can we live on the ground floor within an industrial site? The design assignment therefore shifted towards integrating and investigating housing and its sequence of thresholds from the public realm to private domain.

With the help of the tutors, the focus shifted towards the large cellulose storage facility. Choosing to split this facility to provide a passage from the Fransensingel into the southern part of the SAPPi factory became an important alteration to our urban plan. It is an attempt at developing the relationship between the working factory and living on old factory grounds. The focus was on creating a housing block inside the storage facility, while simultaneously connecting to a new housing tower. Challenges arose on how to connect these socially and technically. The relationship between old and new developed from sitting adjacent to each other, towards an intertwined tapestry transitioning from the urban realm to the domestic domain. The housing block proposes neutral typologies in attempt to support different ways of living and encourages future resiliency and economic sustainability. This position changed following the P2, as the original proposition was to develop new modes of live and work, where currently, the design provides more space – to be personally modified – rather than a strict division between programs.

Later in the semester the community center and its surrounding fabric was integrated at a higher level, 1.200. Developing my design assignment from a 5 building ensemble towards a 2 building relationship allowed me to focus on smaller scales. Being able to switch between material, architectural, social and urban scales quicker allowed me to develop more intimate and tactile scenes on physical realities of life on the design project. The project continued to be challenging due to my determination in trying to solve all aspects at a smaller scale. Gradually, the design assignment of creating an inclusive and intimate community is transitioning towards an architectural project of an ensemble of buildings forming part of a civic structure within Maastricht.

On research

Originally, research showed Maastricht as 'a city of facades', where I proposed to uncover Maastricht as 'a city of portraits'. This narrative approach stemmed from our collective research for P1, where the creation of a script and tapestry - which provided the backdrop for our script - allowed us to show Maastricht as simultaneously fragmented and part of one story, spanning different times and patinas. This led an intuitive approach to my individual research, where ordinary and everyday aspects of life are investigated and shown in short stories through the people I interviewed and encountered. This approach showed the value of immersing yourself into the existing social fabrics of a city. Being in dialogue with residents and users of the city was a central theme in this graduation thesis, where the project became more tactile and realistic. Together with story based telling, demonstrated a new perspective on the role of the architect, in an attempt at diversifying current tools of urban and architectural planning.

This research happened simultaneously while developing my brief. The complementary relationship between research and design was promoted at the beginning of the year. Research by design and design by research are methods to be used in exchange, where experimentation becomes an integral part of the process and products. The P1 phase influenced my individual research while the P2 phase, specifically the urban proposal was a research tool in testing design schemes. Subsequently the second semester led to a decline in research, due to limited time, which felt detached. The narrative of the design project would be improved by continuing this strong relationship until the end of the graduation project.

An integral and fruitful part of research were visits to Maastricht, as well as excursions to Paris, Ghent and Antwerp. Through expanding our theoretical and practical references abroad, we were able to gather and reflect on urban typologies, programs, building designs and materializations. Aspects of these were thus implemented into our research and design.

On relevance

This thesis looks critically at how to develop new, more intimate communities. The thesis subsequently takes place in 2021/22 where the recent pandemic exposed the need and importance of strong social networks and face-to-face contact. Retreat to the private sphere and the apprehension of inviting newcomers into one's home, made research difficult. The design assignment, therefore, became one of providing comfortable dwellings, but also designing engaging public spaces. The transition zones, liminal spaces, subsequently became more important in the design. The design process examined an increase in variety and diversity of depths. The intimate city is therefore a study in which everyday life and ordinary elements become a driver of the design process. It supports the discussions on building socially and environmentally sustainable and resilient communities for future pandemics or challenges.

The study of facades became an important discussion on developing the depths of the project. As the retreat to the private interior came about, the façade became the actors in proposing a sensitive dialogue between public and private realms. These material and immaterial dialogues were gleaned in the research, but also investigated through research by design methods throughout the design process. How and what do facades communicate? Is there a direct reflection of ourselves within facades? It questions current architectural design methods and attempts to decode our relationship with facades.

On methods

The first method, Ethnomethodology: Ethnographic mapping, Interviews, Observation, Photography, were used during the semesters. These tools gave a multi-disciplinary perspective on Maastricht as a city of portraits. Information was able to be pieced together to develop a 'living archive'. The approach informed my design decisions, specifically program choice. A challenge encountered during the research was the very limited access or willingness from residents to go inside their homes. Due to the obvious uphold of privacy, the domestic interior stayed inaccessible. During this, the research was then limited to what we see from the public exterior. Through the use of speculation, together with the information gathered from the other methods, the story can be elaborated towards an investigation on the dialogue we have with facades. The act of drawing and sketching became an important part of research and design as the act of drawing became an intricate part of my thought process. Similarly to artist, Saul Steinberg and many architectural firms, AgwA, architecten de vylder vinck taillieu and Tim Peters Architecten, drawing has allowed me to physical alter the space, connecting my imagination with reality, on paper.

Secondly, Literature and precedents, allowed me to understand different housing typologies, community centers, notions of building social capital, the procession from public to collective to private domains, the architects role in designing through interpreting gleaning. This method informed me while designing housing typologies suitable for the current needs of the future residents of the proposed housing block design. It also allowed me to develop conceptual and material ideas on the transition from public to private domains where these thresholds act as mediators.

On moving forward

In the last trajectory of the graduation project I hope to produce a model exhibiting the multiple depths of the project, highlighting the relationship between existing and new while simultaneously showing the transition between public realm to private interior. Accompanying the model, I would like to develop larger scale hand drawings of moments within the project, developing a representation method that suits the human perspective of the project. In the design process I hope to develop the architectural qualities of the community center in response to the housing block. Additionally, the research will culminate into a book of short stories, together with a journal of my (design) process, again, highlighting the multi-disciplinary approach used this year. These final steps will help culminate the project as an example of introducing the domestic scale within existing industrial fabrics together with research into a variety of thresholds from the public to private sphere.