

Reflection Paper

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Urban Architecture / Studio Bricolage 20/21

Approach

My approach started with an understanding of the studio theme, therefore Bricolage. To act as a Bricoleur, I thought I could organise my research and project as a bricoleur would: investigating the surroundings, understanding what is at hand, starting from my personal fascinations and creating my own set of tools for the project. As a means to achieve this, I organised my research into four catalogues: the first, the Encyclopaedia of Nijmegeners, is a collection of people from Nijmegen, including their stories and hopes, personal landmarks, and collective memory. The second, The Catalogue of Socio-Spatial Behaviour, explores the cultural gestures that describe human interaction with the urban fabric and its effects on it, touching on affordance, appropriation, conflicts, harmonies and temporality. The third one, The Catalogue of Beauty, is an attempt to find value in the city of Nijmegen and its characteristic traits, and within the specific site of the Molenpoort shopping mall. The Inventory of the Molenpoort, the fourth catalogue, lists the material culture of the shopping mall through a selection of pieces that could be reused.

It goes without saying that in order to achieve these catalogues, it was essential that I spent as much possible time on site (dealing with travel restrictions and closures due to the pandemic) recording, photographing, observing, interviewing, following and measuring the city. What this approach gave me, is a sensibility to the context of the site which is deeper, an attachment to and relationships with the residents of Nijmegen and the everyday scenes within the city. The frequent site visits, interviews with the residents, ongoing conversations with them, brought me to an appreciation on being able to “act local”, it allowed me to design with a strong understanding of the context and to get under the skin of the city, hopefully drafting a project that carries the traits and collective memory of the place.



The section of the city of Nijmegen acts as a backdrop for life and its actors. Providing scenarios.
Model made for the movie presented at P1. Photo by Author.

In terms of approaching the research, working strongly both in collectivity and individually unlocked the potential to create a substantial body of common knowledge with other students, from which my individual work stemmed and expanded into the design phase. Having touched very much into the qualitative, phenomenological, anthropological, psychological/behavioural, spheres of the discipline, and coming from the understanding of the city as a stage for everyday life, the research took me to always design thinking about scenarios of human occupation and acts that may happen in the spaces. The programme is looser on purpose, in order to allow for activities to occur within the publicness of the building and of the urban space around and above it. The most important part of the project was to first understand thoroughly the existing building that I was dealing with, and then design a space that would be comfortable and enjoyable for the people of Nijmegen. This enjoyment of architecture and public space is not only reflected in the choice of Leisure as a starting point for design and research, but is also reflected in the programme of the building, the appreciation of the old and the implementation of the new, and the technicalities of the design (such as the climate conditions and sustainability principles applied).

Studio Theme and Relevance

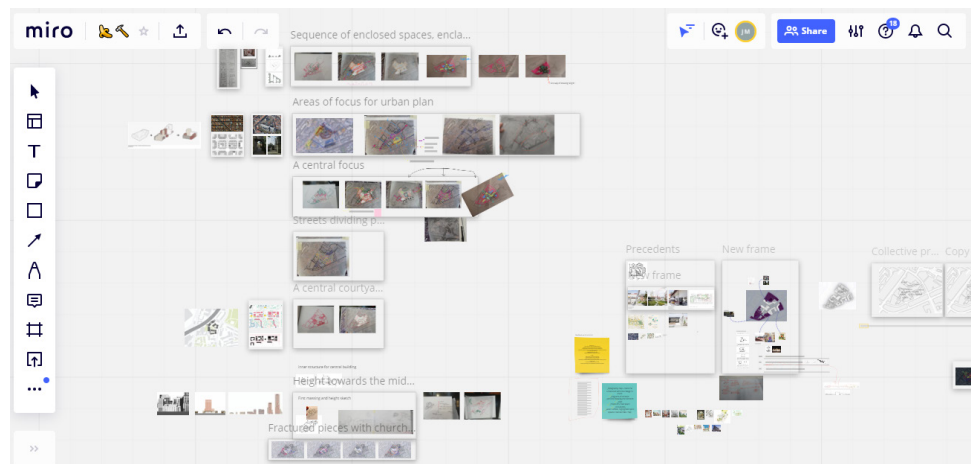
As the Urban Architecture studio 2020/21 is focused on the theme of Bricolage, I have reflected on what this word means to me. I identify with the idea of bricolage being a physical act, the “science of the concrete”. An act of production and reuse, of investigation of the surrounding ecology as it is found, followed by the process of selection and of borrowing from the material culture to make something that serves a purpose. Bricolage expressed a bottom-up approach to craft and the art of making. It requires a process, an inventory, the creation of a toolset from which the project stems. Bricolage also resonates with the idea of richness, the ad hoc, the intuitive, seemingly disordered and ingenuity, which contrasts to the clinical, polished, exact and tidy. In terms of the project, the studio theme of bricolage has taken me towards a discovery of the social complexities of Nijmegen, their effects on the built fabric, and the material culture of the site through a series of inventories. In a lateral sense, the term has also reflected an attitude I developed during the course: it facilitated U turns, changes of programme, the imperfect and unfinished, but also thinking that another era will unequivocally come, and that I (and we as an industry), as a designer, am leaving a “trace” for the next “bricoleur”. Therefore, the marks better be good, meaningful ones. Bricolage has reflected a mindset, a way of releasing expectations and new found appreciation for the unexpected, even in terms of design process, tutorials, themes for the project, relationships and cross-contamination from other students.

Personally, the idea of bricolage also highlights the importance of resources: on a broader perspective, it is an opportunity to reflect on circularity, cycles of systems and reuse of materials, making the design proposal itself become, perhaps, a means of learning and positioning myself within the discourse of circularity and adaptive reuse. Being the latter fundamental themes for the present and upcoming challenges for architects and actors involved in the built environment, my project aims to become an exploration into how to reuse and re-adapt an existing and unused building to the needs of today’s society and climate. My generation of future professionals will have a key role in meeting the set aims for a sustainable built environment, these become very relevant and pressing issues, as we come to the understanding that the systemic demolition of unfit-for-purpose existing structures can no longer be the answer.

Learnings

Something that I have learned this year, is how powerful shared collaboration and group work is.

Starting right from the P1, we created a group of students to share research, knowledge, work and information with. In the urban plan work, this consolidated and carried on through to nowadays, where we managed to still work together and respond to each other's designs creating a somewhat coherent urban plan from the beginning of the P2 to P4.



Snippet from our Urban Plan group Miro wall.
Process and collaboration.

In terms of research, design and architecture, this project has taught me how important it is to be in touch with where and who one is designing for, that architecture and urban design that is meaningful (placemaking) comes from a position of humbleness, willingness to listen, getting involved. Looking away from architecture – and even architectural precedents – that come from a top-down position, and preferring a bottom-up approach, has reinforced my interests in public involvement and my appreciation for architecture which is lived and used, appropriated, which allows for life to unfold inside and on its edges.

Challenges

If bricolage is the science of the concrete and it is indeed an “act”, what I have struggled with this year, is how bricolage can be done digitally, in an academic setting, if it represents an assemblage of physical pieces, found on site or around the site. The constraints of the academia and those dictated by the regulations against Covid-19, which prevented us from being able to navigate the closed shops of the site in depth, to understand its structure and materiality in its raw state, put me in a position to rethink what bricolage meant to me, and expanded my views on it. This is when I started looking at it from a more socio-spatial perspective, a bricolage of people, attitudes, urban characteristics, collective memory and “physical” pieces (the site and the existing building).

A key moment of friction for me, was right after the P3, when it became clear that some of the previous programmatic choices I had made were not fitting for the existing building. After this moment, what helped me move onto an alternative was to look outside of the boundaries within which I had set my project, discovering an opportunity for the existing building and its ruins to really become an integral part of the design.