

Final Reflection

Moving Stories

Liza Zaiceva

Project Overview

My graduation project in the Urban Architecture track reimagines an urban block by placing together repurposed industrial warehouses with new housing into a community “village.” The design balances the warmth and human scale of traditional Flemish row houses with the cold, industrial character of former warehouses. This contrast creates a protective “cold” outer barrier that respects the gritty context and an inviting “warm” interior where communal life unfolds in shared courtyards. Courtyards were integral from the start, providing green oases for residents and fostering belonging.

Urban Architecture Studio

This project directly responds to the Urban Architecture studio by addressing design across multiple scales and proposing a new urban fabric. In the early stages, I developed a masterplan for the entire district, which allowed me to treat the site not as an isolated plot but as part of a broader urban transformation. This masterplan introduced a fabric that combines large, adaptable warehouse typologies with fine-grained, individual housing, creating a new spatial logic for the area. It aimed to reconnect fragmented neighborhoods, bring life to underused industrial zones, and redefine the edge between living and working. Starting from this district-wide vision enabled me to later focus on a specific fragment while staying anchored in values of connectivity, inclusion, and mixed-use vibrancy. This shift—from city scale to architectural scale—reflects the Urban Architecture studio’s ethos of using architectural design to reimagine entire urban conditions, not just buildings.

Design Approach & Methodology

I adopted a memory-based, empathic design approach to give voice to underrepresented groups. Drawing on personal memories and cultural research, I translated lived experiences into spatial solutions. For instance, memories of lively courtyard gatherings inspired intimate communal nooks. This narrative-driven method aligns with an empathy-focused ethos that prioritizes human connection and dignity. It also kept the process participatory: understanding the social history and needs of current immigrant residents and future students and starters guided concepts, while the evolving design raised questions (e.g. privacy vs openness) that I explored through precedent studies. This synergy grounded the project in real community needs while allowing creative exploration.

Key Design Choices

A core design decision was to preserve and repurpose the old warehouses as much as possible and reuse structural material to the possible extent, as a sustainable strategy integral to community identity. The warehouses now host shared facilities (workshops, daycare, medical center), anchoring the site with communal amenities. New housing is threaded around them at a familiar row-house scale, fostering a neighborly atmosphere. Significant use of reclaimed materials further helps blend old and new. Another key move is the “cold barrier, warm inside” arrangement. The outer perimeter presents taller warehouse facades and new building backs as a modest, durable street face, offering privacy and protection to the community. Meanwhile, the inner facades facing the courtyards are open and welcoming, with balconies and arched doors. The courtyards form the social heart of the project: collective green space that brings the community together for safe play and daily interaction. Inspired by Islamic courtyard houses and local hofjes, these gardens provide common ground that bridges cultural differences. Ultimately, every design choice gives residents a sense of ownership and capacity to shape their environment — a tangible form of spatial agency

Process & Feedback

Mentor feedback throughout the process sharpened the design. Early on, I was urged to avoid an overly insular scheme, so I added inviting gateways and sightlines to ensure the courtyards engage with the surrounding neighborhood. Feedback also pushed me to better knit the new housing with the warehouses. I added a glass connector and adjusted materials to help old and new parts harmonize. These iterations improved the project's functionality and clarity. I learned to articulate the "why" behind decisions and to balance personal vision with critique. I also recognized the limits of a memory-driven approach — subjective ideas needed validation through dialogue and research. In the end, blending personal empathy with community insight and mentor critique yielded a more inclusive design.

Next Steps (P5)

Heading into the final phase, I will:

Fine-tune technical details (structural connections, energy and water systems).

Finalize apartment and houses layouts and with user comfort and adaptability in mind.

Polish the presentation and narrative to clearly communicate the design intent.

Address remaining details like public urban spaces and outside public integration.

Conclusion

This project embodies the Urban Architecture track ethos of linking architecture with urban revitalization. Research and design informed each other throughout, enriching the outcome. Methodologically, memory and participatory insights bridged personal narrative with broader spatial values. Academically, the work demonstrates an empathetic adaptive reuse approach; societally, it models how to empower a marginalized community while lowering the carbon footprint. The approach is transferable: creating a protected communal "inside" can benefit other contexts where vulnerable groups need safe gathering spaces, and engaging personal and collective memories can inform design elsewhere. This journey not only produced a design proposal but also deepened my ability to practice architecture with empathy, sustainability, and social agency.