Reflection Paper

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Urban Architecture - Spolia
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CONTENT

1 - Introduction

The Urban Architecture studio focuses on medium-sized urban sites, we could say the scale of the neighborhood. The city is understood as the product of interaction between social and economic forces that are constantly informing and deforming it over time.

During the year, the Urban Architecture studio became a framework for research and analysis on this complex phenomena which is the city. Specifically, the studio focused on the urban condition of a site in Anderlecht, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the suburbs of Brussel; characterized on the one hand by a rich and diverse social context that hosts different cultures and on the other, by a sometimes fragmented urban fabric that presents an intricate mix of residential and former industrial structures. A piece of the city that is in sometimes unstable and that is going to change rapidly in the next years. A place where the economic logics of urbanization are often in contrast with the delicate balance of the everyday life.

Spolia, the main theme of the studio, is considered to be by definition the element of a building, that later on finds itself as part of another construction. This apparently simple phenomena, triggered a process of more careful reflection, going beyond the original definition and becoming itself an object of reflection on the relationship between the material reality of the city and the reality of the daily life.

This stimulating and complex field of investigation has represented for me, over the course of the year, a path of both professional and personal growth, that led me to confront myself with the multiple realities of the city and to find my point of view towards them.

The following chapters provide a reflection on the results obtained so far and the difficulties encountered along the various research and design phases. The structure follows the one provided by the graduation manual with the only change that the ethical considerations, to avoid excessive repetition, are not presented in a separate chapter but within the individual chapters.

2 - Research method and approach.

The first part of the research was done in groups, mine with the research question "Who's neighborhood?". An open and ambiguous question, that allowed us to practice with the field research and experiment with different tools and strategies. The aim was to become familiar with the social dynamics of the place and document the spaces where the ordinary life of Anderlecht takes place everyday. Ultimately the mission wanted to revel possible relationships between the city and the everyday life.

Across several trips on the site, we explored the neighborhood by walking in the streets, meeting local people and trying to involve them in our research. We shot videos, made interviews, annotated, drew and photographed every single noteworthy event, creating maps that could spatially organize all the informations that we were able to collect. The accumulation of information has been such that it has become enormous and sometimes even overwhelming.

For the presentation of the results of the P1 we decided to present only the video documentation, in form of a documentary: "The rooms of Anderlecht", that wanted to give back an image of Anderlecht's everyday life as it unfolds in its daily spaces. Through the frame of the camera we were able to isolate individual stories and spaces from the multiplicity of the everyday life, to create a story, the one that we have encountered, a story like any other, but typical of the reality of Anderlecht. A story made of many tales, made of different ethnic groups and cultures, therefore different ways of living and appropriating the city.

"Who's neighborhood?", more than a question to give an answer to, it was a tool for reflection. Understanding the social dynamics of a place and determine the relationships with the physical reality of the city, in other words, to determine how the city influences the way we live and in turn how the way we life shapes the city overtime, it is certainly a complex problem, that is difficult to be reduced to a series of case studies. It is a *wicked* problem, where the relationships of cause and effect gets confused with each other. It is an issue that cannot be solved with a linear process of accumulation and comparison of data, but only in the form of

narrative and story-telling.

A posteriori, it was possible to reflect on the value of this work. The greatest value was perhaps not to isolate the case studies (which in any case gave the starting point for the project) but to understand the irreducible multiplicity of everyday life and of the city. When approaching the city, It is not possible to understand it in its totality, as it not possible to film every event of the daily life, what is possible to do, is to recover a fragment of it, to tell a story. In this sense, this work justified the necessity of an ideological approach towards the city, in contrast with a scientific one. First of all, a story needs a selection. If we had to tell the comprehensive story of Anderlecht, in its totality, we would necessarily become like Funes the Memorius, main character in the novel of the same name by Jorge Luis Borges, who remembers every detail of the world, like a computer, and for this reason, incapable of any understanding.

2 - Relationship between research and design

Over the course of the year, research and design have been continuously interwoven with each other. Initially the research gave clues for the design and in turn the project informed the research back again.

During the early stages of site analysis and masterplan, moving from the close-up research on the social context to urban-scale planning was not an easy task and required a further mental effort. The influences of the everyday life in regard to the city must be understood in a broader time frame. If we consider the city as an object capable of imprint in its material entity the reasons that brought it into being, we can read this history, as Aldo Rossi teaches, in the morphological drawing of the urban fabric, to be studied as an independent reality.

In this regard, it was necessary to carry out a morphological analysis of the urban facts of the area of interest. Therefore, the logics of settlements, concerning the relationship between industrial and residential buildings, were examined in the specific condition of Anderlecht, bringing up the characteristics that determine the factors of stability and instability and

therefore of possible permanence within the city.

In addition to these specific facts, the support of more general theories about the city was needed to serve as guidelines for navigating the complexity of a post-industrial and fragmented urban fabric like that of Anderlecht. In this regard, the theories of the Archipelago were of fundamental importance.

Finally, another point that more precisely concerns the relationship between research and design, or how research turns into design (speaking more of an architectural scale) is that of the appropriation of other's design solutions and ideas.

The progress of western architecture in the last 200 years, have produced an enormous amount of knowledge. I spite of the fact that this knowledge is out there does not mean that has been fully discovered in all its potential. For this reason, I think that in architecture, the invention of the new should be considered as the appropriation of other's ideas, to be actualized in the specific conditions of the project.

4 - Project and studio.

The Urban Architecture studio presented a double agenda; on the one hand, to develop the project in its urban context and on the other, to focus on the practical aspects of construction. In this regard, the focus of the main theme "spolia" brought more attention on the use and reuse of materials. The Rotor studio, architectural practice based in Anderlecht, precisely on the site of the project, is one of the leading figures on the architectural discussion around the reuse of material and has supported the studio in the reuse strategies of the projects.

My project proposal aims to maintain on site the former Leonidas' warehouses (today used by Rotor as office space and material warehouse) and give it a new function as part of a new Living and Working development. The project proposes the construction of a mixed use (office-residential) building that embraces the existing structure, in order to respond to the

demands of the real estate market, while at the same time developing an already existing spatial situation. Only the steel supporting structure of the existing building is maintained, in order to create a void, accessible to the public, around which the functions of the other buildings are organized.

The studio also led to a deeper reflection on the temporal dimension of the use of a building; in this regard the project has been conceived as open infrastructure, capable of future reiteration of use. Thinking about the building scale, instability is the condition that determines that a structure is more likely to be replaced is the future. On the other hand, flexibility can be considered as the spatial qualities of a load bearing structure that enables the building to absorb future changes. The structure of the new building, has been inspired by the Dom-Ino house from Le Corbusier, conceived as the ground zero of the tabula rasa, i.e. a structure open to future changes without the need to be demolished. The structural cores have been positioned at the extremities of the building and the circulation placed out side of the structure, leaving the central space free from structural elements and always accessible. In this way it was possible to superimpose five levels of residential with three levels of working spaces.

To conclude, the focus on construction and reuse of material, ma me think not only on what to keep and how to reuse, but also to elaborate construction details that would allow parts my building to be dismantled in the future and possibly to be reused.

5 - Relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework.

The research carried out with the studio made me reflect more deeply on the reality of the city and on how the economic and political forces influence it. I found myself confronted with the complexity of urban facts, how they are produced and used over time, and of the social dynamics, of which architecture cannot be a unique answer. In response to this complexity,

the project seeks an antidote in the elaboration of its form: simplicity.

From the urban point of view, the project represents a shape with a well recognizable perimeter and the shapes of the buildings creates a composition of simple volumes. Architecture is reduces to simple geometrical forms, easy to be understood from an idealogical and but also from a practical point of view of construction and maintenance. In this way, architecture tries to reveal, by contrast, the complexity of the urban.

The proposed building, in its spatial organization, takes a detachment from everyday life, it is not tailored to the momentary needs of the individual, but calibrated on the processes it must host, designed for the circulation of people, animals and things.

Another fundamental point of the project concerns the role of the architect in the confrontation with the logics of urbanization. Urbanization is here understood in the original conception of the term, that is the all-encompassing modalities of growth of the city let by the principles of economical profit. In this regard, the project proposes to keep the existing structure of the former Leonida's warehouse (already listed to be demolished in favor of a generic residential complex) and to reuse it as a central part of a Living and Working development. In this way the project tries to absorb the pressures of the housing market, to establish a form and a program in continuity with the urban reality and the spirit of Anderlecht.

From a professional point of view, simplicity and clarity, as a line of direction, is something that allows other people to contribute to the project and make it grow, as I believe was the case with my tutors who guided me during the project. In the same way, I think that could be a useful principle as well in carrying out a project like this in real life, where the project would be managed by a larger group of different professionals figures.

To conclude, I also think that the simplicity of the form and the solidity of a building, give a more appropriate image to architecture. Especially in respect of the great environmental pressure, of which the industry of construction, inevitably represents one of the major causes.