

Reflection Paper

# **A**<sub>ntwerp's</sub> **very hungry Caterpillar**

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## Reflecting on the year:

I understand my research as a journey that guided me through the graduation year, from the search for meaning to come to an understanding of how to work with a building. This journey was marked by dead ends, doubts, and shifting focuses. Yet, only an honest search can lead to new findings. Being lost is part of this. That is exactly how my year began, when I joined the „find the river“ research group, which was an invitation to search for the unknown.

This group research sparked my interest: to understand the existing condition of the urban fabric by learning from the history of the site.

With that intention on one side, I was also searching for a method to work with the abandoned buildings on the other side. How to touch them?

To explore this, I opened up a different angle. The artwork of Gordon Matta-Clark presented the start of my study of material transformation and obsolescence. Through his practice, he forcefully cuts into neglected buildings, slicing through materials with precision and leaving behind voids that challenge the conventional perception of architectural integrity. A form of protest against urban development and demolition, which simultaneously reveals the materiality and hidden structures of buildings. So I come to wonder, could there be an architectural cut that intersects the old and new structures in my design?

Through archival and site research, I learned about the industries that once shaped Hoboken. Yet today, they co-exist as separate islands. My aim became to work with what is found, to open up the formerly closed production site and create new relationships between the neighbourhood and productive activity. Therefore, my design proposed the transformation of the 1960s office building into housing for the youth, apprentices, along with a new factory building, both connected by shared amenities and a courtyard.

This architectural approach, in combination with my research and search for a translation of the „cut,“ slowly led me to a dead end. I come to question the choices I made. I realised that trying to solve homogeneity by introducing a new, monofunctional architecture only created new problems. Moreover, the longer I worked with the idea of the cut, the more I saw the distance it created from the essence of the site. There was no need for a grand architectural statement, but rather, a careful intervention. The destructive force behind the concept of the cut left me wondering whether such an architectural gesture was the right approach.

A reorientation was needed, a literal shift in perspective. All the time I was looking from the south side of the factory building onto the site, but my initial curiosity started from the North, the Lageweg. The office building with its long and narrow body once shielded the production halls from the public, acting as „the face“ of the industry. It is connected to an older entrance building from the 1920s. Together, they form a peculiar ensemble.

So I made the decision to refocus on working closer with the existing buildings, in line with the knowledge of the archival research. The aim became to find incentives from the site itself, elements that could guide future transformation rather than imposing a new building block. So, how to work with the existing?

The study of Gordon Matta-Clark brought me closer to a look into the materiality of buildings. His raw incisions continue to fascinate me but with the responsibility to create my own project, I began to wonder if this place needs something different: a better understanding. A diplomatic approach.

But how to practice material diplomacy?

This question led to a shift in my research towards immersive fieldwork. Valuing what is there, beyond historical and functional value. I started to understand the building as an entity with rights that need to be heard. But how to communicate if we don't speak the same language?

Again, the search for a translation. Could drawings or models act as mediators? I undertook several fieldwork expeditions: a series of tête-à-têtes with the building. I tried to learn from it and about it by documenting my observations and emotions on site. This process finally led me to find answers to the overarching question:

How can the past and present life of a building serve as a guide in its process of transformation?

How can a dialogue be initiated with a non-human entity such as a building?

Finally, this research helps me to realise my design in such a way that it continues the movement of the two existing office buildings, which are connected by the common staircase volume. Three distinct parts of the building from different eras are now connected by the joints of the staircases and the gallery as an access system. The oldest part, which contains a restaurant and cookery school, the main part, which houses various work/life and shared living apartments, while the new head is a space where people can tell and listen to stories and come together in the multifunctional theatre space.

I see my project as a hungry caterpillar, a being in continuous transformation. It exists in a state of becoming, shaped by time, materials, and new architectural nutrition. Its hunger is not just for space, but for meaning and renewal. With a long, narrow body stretched along the site, it grows a new segment, nourished by the design.

In the end, I very much appreciate the freedom that this studio gave me to find my path. Only with this ability to take shifts and turns could I develop my interest. I am sure that the results of my work are thus closely tied to this process.

#### Set of questions:

##### 1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track, and your master programme?

My graduation project explores the transformation of vacant industrial buildings into a new urban neighbourhood, rooted in the character and history of the site. The design engages with the identity of the location, integrating its industrial past into a spatial narrative that reimagines the relationship between living and working. My approach aligns closely with the theme of the studio, which explores how the twentieth-century industrial belt surrounding Antwerp can be transformed into a new city centre - a 'downtown'. Both the project and the studio are directly related to the aim of my Master's programme to find sustainable and innovative solutions to contemporary urban challenges: How can the obsolete buildings inform the future?

##### 2. How did your research influence your design/ recommendations, and how did the design/ recommendations influence your research?

Research and design influenced each other continuously throughout the project. The research encouraged me to engage closely with the existing building to understand its materials, history, and role in the site. Starting to see the building as an active participant rather than a passive object shaped my design approach to be more sensitive towards the existing. At the same time, working directly with the building raised new questions and shaped the direction of the research. Design and research became a dialogue, each feeding into the other, each guiding the next step.

### 3. How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

I see great value in developing a personal and subjective approach to working with existing buildings.

Each building brings with it unique conditions and therefore requires an equally specific and careful method of engagement. My approach is based on the belief that we need to look beyond measurable factors if we are to truly appreciate existing structures. It is often the small details that reveal the character and potential of a building.

My methodology was not fixed from the beginning, but was shaped by the process. I started with a certain distance, but through research, site visits and encounters with the material, I felt the need to get closer - to listen, observe and respond more closely. This gradual shift became part of the method itself: a movement from analysis to proximity, from concept to dialogue. It is a way of working that accepts change, uncertainty and learning as part of the design process.

### 4. How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implications of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

The academic and social value of this project lies in its contribution to the development of thoughtful methods for dealing with the existing built environment.

In a time of material scarcity, energy crisis and climate urgency, the reuse and transformation of the existing is not only sustainable but also ethically necessary. The project addresses these concerns by exploring how to work with the cultural, spatial and material richness of existing structures rather than replacing them.

In addition to the environmental aspects, the project also emphasises the social and emotional significance of existing buildings. These structures are carriers of collective memory, local identity and hidden values. By engaging with them through careful observation and design, the project encourages a more responsible and attentive architectural practice.

### 5. How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

Although the project is very site-specific, its methods are transferable.

The close connection to the building and its context limits direct replication, but the approach - developing a personal, research-based relationship with a structure - can guide similar transformation processes elsewhere. The project encourages to discover unexpected value in obsolete buildings and to treat existing elements not as obstacles but as collaborators.

This method encourages a careful reading of a building's architectural language and supports a non-hierarchical coexistence of old and new. It demonstrates the importance of thoughtful decisions - knowing what should be preserved, what can be changed and where demolition becomes part of a respectful dialogue rather than being erased.