Reflection paper
1. Introduction

Urban architecture is the studio in which I decided to develop my graduation project. The two main reasons that led me to this choice were the double focus on a theoretical understanding of complex reality followed by the interest in architecture as built reality.

This characteristic of realism is for me crucial in the discussion of architecture and therefore, the mix of structure and freedom that the studio allowed for has been a productive mix. In my opinion, by looking to the future, Urban Architecture offers a solid exercise in preparation of the forthcoming entrance in the reality of the practice.

The topic of the studio, spolia, became really quickly a lens to understand the city and its reality. Spolia takes the time to understand reasons going beyond the phenomenological experience of the space searching for meaning and unrevealed logics. The definition, in this regard, is absurdly undefined, but it is an ongoing process of identification of points of interest and clarity. What it is now clear, to me, after one year of experimentation and confrontation is that spolia is a sensible position towards the landscape and the city. The term in the context of the studio surpasses the re-appropriation of material to that of a defined approach to architecture. The spoils are found in the existing space and form of the built fabric, the traces of memory within evolved sites and the everyday routines, use and occupation of the people in their neighbourhood. Spolia is the consciousness that a deep relation is established between the forms and the culture that generate these forms, one justifies itself in the other, one becomes evident in the other.

The pieces of spolia engage with the concrete, site specific, everyday pieces of the city and they are valuable fragments carefully collected to re-narrate an old, well known, story: reality. This has been the starting point and in a sense also the conclusion of this process but definitely a crucial part to develop a coherent project from the research phase to its spacial translation.

2. The relationship between research and design

The research in the Urban Architecture is conceived as integral part of the design process and has been subdivided in two main parts: a collective research about the city of Brussels, some characteristic condition of the site and a more substantial individual research that in my case focused on the development of some categories to re-read the city of Brussels and the surrounding of our site as an infrastructural system.

The initial research about the “lost river” of Brussels The Senne setted one principle that has been crucial along the whole year: the idea that every pre-existing story of the city can be read in the contemporary city if we pay enough attention to the forms and details of the built and unbuilt environment.

From this initial awareness the second phase of the research took the shape of a record of a research, a collection of a series of ideas about architecture and the city. The work developed around three elements: the infrastructure, the perimeter and the room and challenged the understanding of parts of Brussels through these lenses in its final part.

The research tries to define these themes and appropriate the idea of definition as a tool to position myself as an architect in contemporary practice in an economy of energy.
3. Project area

The site selected for the graduation studio is located in Anderlecht, one of Brussel’s poorest neighborhoods. The specific site is a very complex scenario of transition of scale in the city condition; the complexity is generated by two main elements: the fragmentation of the urban fabric and the coexistence of the dense and traditional urban fabric with the large scale of the infrastructural and productive reality of the city.

The block itself extends for a surface of over 50,000sqm and a fairly big park exists in the middle of it. The masterplan phase in this sense was crucial to translate both the understanding of the city as analysed in the research and the intention of the design in a meaningful proposal, sensible yet future driven, sure and conscious in the way the existing can and should be treated a good balance between respect and future driven proposals.

3.1 The critical approach

The exploration developed with the project aims to understand and test the possibility of re-creating the understanding of a place by recalling the value of a former whole through the resonance of fragments.

This is enacted by understanding the fundamental condition of architecture in the construction of the idea of identity of a place especially in the role of backdrop for the everyday. The creation of a spatial understanding becomes thus, the central point of the project and this is accomplished by a certain level of autonomy and by a rigorous definition of the precondition of the space and its fundamental characteristic. Moreover, this position is reinforced by the rationalist idea that architecture is a rigorous reflection upon the urban facts, where the principles are few and defined but the answers the architect and society can develop for the everyday challenges are multiple and unpredicted.

3.2 The public building in Anderlecht

“We are tired of the compulsory extravaganza to which architects are condemned in order to make visible their contribution to the city. We aim to design architectural artefacts as simple forms.”

The central theme that translates from the research to the project phase is the role and the condition of the collective and public building not only in contemporary time but also in the specific context of Anderlecht. From a deep understanding of the role that such a project assumes in the structure of the city a reflection about its character is developed. Sobriety gives solemnity to the building, there is no spectacle to be seen beside the everyday taking place and occupying the space. The public building still performs its role of monument as intended in Rossi’s writing: a rational attempt to project the common ground for our society. The tension between this ideal symmetry and the city’s uncanny complexity represents the struggle between the ideal of the European Project and the divergent and often fragmented reality of Brussels.
4. Elaboration on research method and approach

The Urban Architecture chair leaves the possibility to develop the research in freedom and with autonomy of methodology but with a project oriented approach. I opted to develop my exploration in the form of an essay supported by theoretical considerations and literature studies. As mentioned above the first period of the year has been dedicated to develop a comprehensive understanding of the topic of the studio and the site where to develop these ideas. This happened in the form of collective exhibitions with two key moments during the P1 and P3 presentations.

Architecture in the studio is understood as with better words Rossi described as “positive creation inseparable from the life of society in which it occurs; and in large part as a collective practice”. The exhibition perfectly suited these two requirements of positivist and collective action: collective production of knowledge and space. The exhibitions were also moments of public confrontation between the students of the studio and the outer world. Being able to present to someone else outside the studio context a work requires extra care in the way the ideas are presented and represented.

Regarding the design, the methodology that I applied is the one of analytical drawing, through which I developed and clarified my architectural proposal. The constant use of architectural and artistic references constitutes the base of my design methodology, that does not aim to innovate in terms of creativity but instead it favours the understanding of the important characters of existing architectures: not a mere copy, but a re-proposition in present times of the values that those architectures contain. This is what fascinated me in developing a design, and the feature I decided to apply and strengthen in my graduation project.

5. Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework

The focus of the graduation year investigation as mentioned has been thematised through the idea of spolia but the re-definition of the term was the primary condition to make it personal and to be able to use it in the site specific scenario. What interested me the most were not the mere consequences of the idea but rather the pre-conditions that consciously or unconsciously generate this approach.

Three terms describe these positions: Poverty, Ecology and Decoration.

These are fundamental conditions that not only coexist in the city but are primary actors in the way the built environment is shaped by planners, economy and users.

Spolia is in the first place linked with the idea of poverty of resources and knowledge, this condition generates unexpected solutions for problems that don’t have an obvious answer but the misusing of an object opens to an original and fitting solution. It is an approach driven by necessity; it is at its rudimental level the reason for architecture to appear.

Ecology is instead the marked drien interest in how the embodied value of material, energy and history can be re-used or re-interpreted to progress and solve real site specific conditions. This approach works with the found as possibility of new use through the technical forms of efficiency with a problem-solution strategy. This condition highlights the complex reality of a society model on an endless resource scheme in a reality of scarcity.
Decoration lastly is the condition for the generation of meaning in architecture. It is the category that translates the previous in an act of representation. This role of the decoration is deeply rooted in the pre-conditions of construction and significance. The value is given to the object not because of its embodied value but by the understanding of the significance of the element.

The understanding of these three reality co-presents in the contemporary city is the critical understanding that the idea of spolia offers to the city and the landscape.

5.1 Discuss the ethical issues and dilemmas you may have encountered

The graduation year has also been an opportunity to challenge my assumptions and reference in architecture.

The main turning point of my graduation happened during the P3 presentation where the planning developed until that point was challenged in the real complexity of the site to a smaller scale. This was the primary point of friction between the master planning phase that tried to acknowledge the complexity and the hierarchy of the city and site, and the scale of the building that re-established new internal hierarchy. This has been a key passage also to develop more attention to the scale of the interaction that a building develops with its surrounding. This doesn’t mean a reduction in the character of sobriety of the building but a higher level of attention to the touching point between the different systems.

The second attention that the studio brought as a point of discussion is the key balance between the materiality as a fundamental element to bridge technical requirements and representation of the forms in a reciprocal process of definition, a point of sensibility that I enjoyed and will further develop after the conclusion of this project.

To conclude, this project enabled me to confront myself with challenges that I had never faced before during my architectural journey. Not only I am satisfied with the new knowledge acquired during the process but I am also confident that I will carry it on in my future professional career for their relevance and importance in the present architectural debate.