Reflecting on the Process

My ambition, when enrolling in the Interiors Graduation Studio, was to develop a considered and wholly realised proposal. One that would then give me a comprehensive understanding of all the parts of the profession which I could then take into practicing architecture. This I feel is evident in my project and is something that has slowly come into fruition over this year. On reflection I think that my ambitions to create a modest proposal entirely fit within the theme of the Intimate city and within the setting of Antwerp. Both parameters meant the projects had to be very contextually relevant, and required a keen understanding of their place in the city. Throughout this year I have learnt a considerable amount about being able to produce quality design, and how to carry this understanding and newfound techniques into realising my own project.

My graduation project is the development of a new Master Architecture School for Antwerp. The proposal for this project stemmed from an underlying ambition to comment on the institution feeling of most architecture schools promote. The idea of openness and permeability have been the principle themes that have shaped and moulded the project through this year and are, I am happy to say, are evident in its realisation.

Understanding The Intimate City

Our studio theme of the year has been *The Intimate City*. The theme posits that the city is a place where people come together, where private selves are brought into contact and collision with each other in public.¹ For me this was a rather vague notion and required a great deal of reading around the subject in order for me to fully comprehend the topic. I began by reading *The Fall of the Public Man*, by Richard Sennet. This book gave me an insight into the idea of *the public man* and helped me in my understanding of how public space can be seen as its own entity. In extension, this helped me to understand the phenomena of the *City Room*, spaces in which individuals come into contact with each other in the public realm. I then began to understand how these spaces have impacted public life which sparked me interest in exactly how this has happened.

I then took this new understanding and interest into the two research cities we were given; Paris and Milan. With my sense of the Intimate City, coupled with my new understanding of the public man, I was able to document the cities in this way, noting in particular the moments that I felt created this sense of intimacy. These moments almost exclusively occur within these *City Rooms*, so I found it was useful to start building up a library of references of these spaces, something which I have constantly referred back to this year. Of particular interest to me was how architects have used space and architectural gestures to give the user the feeling of separation from the city, with the intention of enhancing a particular atmosphere of the space.

Our second trip to Milan, led by the learned Mark Pimblett, focussed more on the symbiosis between the user and the building. Where there is a significant typology of one, it is often down to or will influence the other. This was shown in the astute work of Asnago e Vender and their understanding of the zeitgeist of Milan in the 20th century. Which has resulted in a timeless quality apparent in their buildings. We took this understanding of Milan and translated our findings into a book titled *A Reading of Milan*. What we found was that through understanding some of the key buildings through drawings and

¹ Extract taken from the studio brief.
studies, that Milan can be understood through these individual moments because they are so significant to the city. We concluded that through these individual moments, we were able to understand how modern Milan came into being and how it has influenced public life.

Following this period of research, it was then time to translate our interpretations into architectural space. This was a fascinating process as each student had very different ideas and responses. I concluded that the theme is inherently personal to each individual. For me the ideas of Sennet and the types of city rooms we experienced in Milan fuelled my response to the task. An Intimate City Room for me is a place that allows the individual to be alone nurturing a sense of freedom. Freedom from the city, and from everyday life. This in turn creates moments that are remembered.

My response was a culmination of these ideas and processes and in its intention, attempted to create a sense of being removed from the city whilst still being physically part of it. I found that my response was very literal and I felt the emotions I was trying to evoke were too forced. I found it hard to imagine this space forming part of a city because of its monumentality. However the techniques used, such as the sequence of spacing and use of intermediate space was an important theme of the intimate city for me and became one of the main lenses I used to explore Antwerp.

**Taking this into Antwerp**

It was then time to take what I had learnt from the research part of the studio into our given city, Antwerp. It was clear from the start how the themes we had explored were relevant to the city, with its strong medieval heritage which can still be seen in the visible layering of the city today. My immediate reaction to the city was that the theme of *intimacy* could be understood in Antwerp in two separate ways. Firstly, the density and scale of the city creates very intimate settings through the closeness of streets which open up to small courtyards and gardens. Everything is on the human scale. One of our first tasks with the city was to create a Noli Map of some of the key areas to discover how we could start to unlock the city. For me this was the second way in which I interpreted the intimacy of Antwerp; in order for the city to be able to be fully explored one must have a great understanding of it. Antwerp cannot be explored in a day. Often the key spaces and city rooms are concealed behind walls and located within urban blocks. This meant that when these spaces were discovered, due to the apparent closed nature of them, they felt all the more intimate.

The Noli map turned out to be an important tool for me and allowed me to focus on an area of Antwerp. My chosen site is located within the university district of Antwerp. I found that this area held a significant number of *City Rooms* which could be unlocked via the Noli Map and I was interested to explore this further. The notion that there is a sub-network of routes known only to those who know the area wholly answered theme of the intimate city for me and I felt right away that my interpretation of the theme fit within this area. The site I chose was able to further add to the theme of embedded city rooms by the removal of a derelict building, so I was very happy with my chosen site. From this I began to draw contextual sections of the *City Rooms* in the area to understand how these moments of intimacy are created. I concluded, much like the other cities I had visited, that the atmospheres achieved, are through interstitial spaces acting as transition zones between the city rooms and the city itself. The narrative of the area for me then became one of a sequence of spaces all connected via a sub-network which was something I was eager to contribute to.

**The Road to P2**

The idea of having to choose my own brief and location I found a rather daunting task, having never done this before. I was fortunate however due to a conversation with the dean of Antwerp School of Architecture, in which I found that the school needed to expand. I saw this as an opportunity to comment on currently architectural education with my chosen site by creating a more permeable school concept. I therefore had, from an early stage, a chosen site and chosen programme.
Transitional spaces leading up to Palais Royal, Paris.

A sketch of San Lorenzo Piazza, Milan.
My next task was to explore architecture schools in more depth, looking at how they operate, how they present themselves and what type of position they take on architecture and education. I undertook an exercise of drawing the plans for a selection of schools to begin to understand the types and size of spaces in an architectureschool. From this I began to see how different architecture schools are from each other and instilled in me the importance of some key questions I would need to answer with my proposal.

What is the role of my school? How will architecture be taught? How does the school present itself?

This meant by answering these questions I was questioning some of the fundamentals of architecture education, and due to the weight of these questions I have only recently been able to answer them in full with my proposal.

At my P2 I proposed three different levels of interaction with the city, from a simple public route to a fully permeable learning space. My preferred option incorporated the design ideas I had learnt in my P1 and through differing thresholds the interaction between student and public could be achieved whilst maintain a degree of separation. Whilst my research and relevance of my positions was complemented at my P2, my designs were criticised for being too literal in response to my research. This I felt was due to the early stage of the project and would germinate in the next stage of the design process.

On reflection however the apparent ease in which I found my site and proposal was not beneficial for my P2. Because I had already found them I did not fully consider why I wanted to propose this site in this location. For me the proposal worked but this was not adequate for P2 and I feel is the reason why I struggled in this period. It was a hard lesson, however it instilled in me the importance of constantly relating my thoughts to my overall ambition.

**Finding my Position**

The next stage in the graduation journey was retrospectively the most challenging part of the process for me. I found the theme of a collective space for students and the theme of adding to the subnetwork of routes at complete opposites from each other and difficult to solve. Along with such questions as what type of city room am I making, what is the role of my school, how does this address the theme of the intimate city. These were big questions for me and rather frustratingly hard to solve.

My first response was to work further on a clear programme for the school. By asking friends and fellow students I found I was able to create a very specific programme that was sensitive in its intention to fully cater to the needs of an architectural student. I found that students value a base that they can appropriate, and the idea of creating a home for students has been a key consideration in the manifestation of this proposal. In parallel I studied other programmes for architecture school competitions and this helped me formulate a dynamic and realistic programme. I found that working from the inside out was the most effective way to get a grasp on my project, what uses should be grouped together, how the school will function and a clear distinction of public and private space.

At the same time, I continued to work on the massing of the scheme, working back and forth between trying to define the role of the school and its urban gesture. I found this was most effective at 1:200 scale. Due to the density of streets working at the larger scale allowed me to understand how the experience of the alley could be added to with my massing. This massing stage lasted for some weeks whilst I worked on the urban gesture I wanted to make. As mentioned before I found the conflicting themes of a collective space and permeability difficult to combine into the correct response. The answer came when I was able to understand how I wanted the school to present itself, and from that I found my urban gesture.
Evolution of massing from initial idea to fixed urban gesture.

*My City Room.*
The intention of the project is to place the education of architecture in the heart of the urban realm, therefore negating its usual academic isolation. The urban realm then becomes part of the school which serves as a reminder to the students of who they are designing for and allows the school to be more publicly accessible. This can create chances encounters where the student and passerby meet, and these moments of interaction form the intimacy in my project.

This really helped me define my intention on the urban scale and also to define the role of the school. This project is about creating those instances. By physically splitting the school into two, the space in the middle naturally became the collective space. I found that this collective space — opposed to typical typologies which have large open atrioums — could remain relatively undefined in its use other than to bridge the gap between school and public. Urbanistically this collective space forms the interior courtyard where the students continually cross to use the other part of the school. This continual usage much like an atrium meant that there would be this interaction between the public crossing the space and the students flitting between both buildings. Secondly the public courtyard pertains to the theme by acting as the interstitial space between my city room and the city beyond. I felt this was further justified when I found that the existing school has a similar public and private courtyard sequence.

This led to clarity in the programme also with a clear definition of the two buildings. One as the student building, exclusively for their use housing the studios and workshop. This is a space where the work is produced, the factory element of the school. The other building is the more public one with the café, gallery, lecture space. This building acts as the finishing part of the design process, where the students go to present their work once it has been designed and can then be exhibited, hence the more public aspect also. This was something highly important in my programme research; to give students the sense of ownership of space, something that we find most frustrating about TU Delft. Therefore, I had this clear urban gesture and accompanying understanding of the role of my school which I felt fit within the themes I had found.

Refining the Project

Once I had the fixed urban gesture I began to develop the hierarchy of spaces within my plan. It was important to maintain a clear relationship with both buildings whilst at the same time defining which had importance over the other. I found the L shape typology with its large blank wall to be a challenging factor in the plan making of the student building. This meant that the proximity to natural light became a dominant factor in the arrangement of the studios. I then underwent a long process of experimentation in how this block would function and where the location of the entrance should be. The elbow joint was a returning issue for daylight and became a consistent aggregation in my plan. This was something I did not manage to solve until after P3.

The main building was more challenging to define its role in this space. I knew this building had to be spatially and expressively the more important one, however the degree of this was something I found over time. The first iteration was to make three floors of different proportion and different use; a café, a gallery, and a lecture hall. This clarity of type was favourable, and I saw how each one could develop in a detailed manner to have its own meaning. However, I felt the stacking of uses did not relate to the permeability of the site. My decision to merge the two main buildings into one and to create a passage leading into the interior courtyard solved this problem. The passage for me was a happy accident resulting from this and helped to further reinforce the position of the school by adding another spatial experience when walking through the site.

My choice for materialisation was down to the intention to create honest architecture. I felt that as an architecture school I wanted to the spaces to be understood by all. It was important for me that when a student looks at the space they can understand how the building is held up, the way the structure works and how everything functions. I found this could also
help define the two buildings by having the student building entirely exposed to act as a learning tool for the students and while the man building conceals much of the architectural elements to create a clean finish. My choice for material of brick and timber was to create a more modest school that nestles back into its context. I wanted to work with simple materials to create a solid piece of architecture. My intention throughout the project has been to not create a landmark, in its function or design. I have always maintained the idea of creating a modest proposal in a modest way and to just do it well, therefore the choice of materials I feel reflects this. I then began to look at traditional timber constructions and begin the learning process of how my building will be constructed in detail.

Reflecting on my P3 I felt that my design was on the right track however it needed a series of small tweaks to turn it from a generic project to something special. The general elements were there however the clarity of the plan needed to be refined, the structural principles were not logic enough and my facades and the interior courtyard needed to be properly considered, I had spent some time on my façade however the feedback revolved around the question of what message are my facades trying to convey. That was something I had not considered and was a key element to solve for the realisation of my city room. I felt that I had got to the point where each part of the design worked in its own way, but they did not work as a whole. I needed to figure out how to make this project read as an architecture school. I needed to let it speak for itself.

Grounding of Principles

The time between P3 and P4 I have spent as mentioned above, grounding the principles of the project. Attempting to bring everything together to make one unified whole. I started by giving the student building a clear hierarchy in the plan, the large blank wall has always been the secondary space to the other. Therefore, the idea of having served and serving spaces allowed me to use this to my advantage and create a simple solution by having the habitable studios bordered by serving spaces. I was happy with this decision of creating a clear distinction between the two as an easy learning tool of the hierarchy of spaces. The next big step was to re-design the elbow space and take this into becoming the step-off point of each floor. This now contains the communal space and by having a large open stairway next to the façade I can bring natural light into the space. As the first place for each floor it was logical that this should be the interstitial space to the studios, with a breakout area, toilets, and lockers. This means that this can be a more relaxed, louder space before entering the calming studio atmosphere.

Another key part to solve was the articulation of the facades. As I have had not much experience with façade design I began by simply attempting to make a readable façade using the primary elements of base-middle-top. After a few weeks I came up with a working façade albeit relating more to the 1930s than to modern day. The façades were still not conveying the message I wanted: to be read as the same building whilst creating a hierarchy between the two. This was all about small margins and subtle differences and a large amount of experimentation as I found there is no typology of an architectural school, so it was necessary to work out how to convey this. For the finalised proposal I looked at the work of Sebastiano Serlio and his work on stage design, to understand how he created certain moods with architectural language. My response it to create two buildings that are reacting to each other and this in turn gives the central space the city room atmosphere I was aiming to create.

In parallel to this, I have been looking in depth at my construction and the representation of this on the façade. I have been working on part bay elevations and sections at 1:20 scale, and I have found that this had been an incredibly fruitful exercise. By combining this with fold-out elevation models of the entire façades I have been able to get a real sense of what the building will look like in the space, and to how my construction can then help reflect my message in the façade.

In the last couple of weeks leading up to P4 I find myself in a fortunate position to be able to start looking in depth at the materialisation and detailing of the spaces. Now that I have a fixed façade treatment I am going to look at how every element can add to the message I am conveying. Everything should be helping me realise my overall idea, even down to the way the heat exchanger is read on the façade and what blind system would help promote a residential feeling to the student building. These are the small bits I now want to really focus on to transform my project from a working proposal into one of significant quality.
Working on the structure and facades at 1.20

Oscillating between 1.20 and 1.200 to find the correct urban response and choice of materials.