

P4 Reflection

Graduation Thesis

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Studio: Urban Architecture – Spolia

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Introduction

In this reflection paper, I will discuss the evolution of the graduation project, from the early stages of research to the finalization of the design proposal, going over the taken steps, challenges and accomplishments. First, I will address the relationship between the studio and the project topic, followed by the relationship between research and design. Moreover, I will discuss the chosen method and approach, as well as the relevance of my project in the wider social and professional context, and the issues or challenges encountered in the process. The last section of this reflection will describe how the initial research questions were answered during the design process, and how the final part of the graduation will be filled in.

Urban architecture - *Spolia*

The Urban Architecture graduation studio focuses on the topic of *spolia*, a term from archaeology that defines the leftovers of a building that find themselves back in a new structure. The studio puts special emphasis on working with existing buildings, and reusing building materials into new structures. My previous studios (Public Building for MSc1 and Complex Projects for MSc2) had a focus on larger urban issues, whereas the Urban Architecture offers a more site-specific approach, dealing with the physical and social fabric of the place. It focuses on materiality, tectonics, and the value of the existing, offering a different approach towards urban design, architecture and the use of materials, an approach that I felt was necessary to add to my education at TU Delft, since these are values that I strongly value in practice.

The site location for this graduation studio is an urban block in Anderlecht, Brussels, that presents both social and spatial fragmentation, with different social groups and building typologies that coexist in the same urban block. Two questions posed in the premise of the studio were 'what to keep' on the site, and 'what to build'. To answer these questions, it was relevant to gain a comprehensive understanding of what is there, material or immaterial. Several trips to the site were encouraged, to document and absorb the identity of the site. There is certain richness in the variety of typologies that coexist in the same urban block, and in the evident traces of transformation over the years that the site has undergone, from mostly industrial to residential. Currently, as a result of the transformations on the site over the years, the block is fragmented and the different parts are not accessible from the other fragments. It seems as if the site has been transformed by chance, and this arbitrariness is what gives richness and value to the site. Variety is seen as an asset, and the site offers many possibilities to be transformed, keeping the existing as much as possible, while also creating a positive effect on the neighbourhood.

The studio encouraged the students to look at the site not only through the lens of architecture, but also the lens of anthropology and social sciences – observing behaviors, the interaction between the users and the built environment and social relationships, to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the site, ensuring that the social issues of the site were addressed in the architectural project. This anthropological approach and the extensive fieldwork carried out on the site is what led me to the choice of my research topic, which will be discussed in the next section of this paper. The project aims to restructure and transform the site, dealing with the current spatial and social fragmentation, focusing on social aspects, as well as tectonic relationships between the existing and the new, and material reuse as a sustainable practice, something that is of significant relevance in the field of architecture.



Images taken on the site during one of the fieldtrips – observations of behaviour, *spolia* and materiality

Research and design

The apparent traces of transformation on the site over the years put the factor of time in the foreground, something that is often ignored in the field of architecture. Architecture is subjected not only to the elemental forces of time, but also the social forces of time, defined by the change of users and functions over time. Buildings are usually designed to be a finished product, with a specific use, leaving the time factor out of the equation. This often leads to vacancy or underuse, due to the inability of the building to adapt to new uses or undergo a transformation to accommodate new uses. My research topic focused on the factor of time, and aiming for the unfinished – in order to allow time to take its course in a positive manner. The research involved fieldwork, literature studies on the topic, and the creation of a graphic narrative that illustrates the changes that the site has undergone over time and will in the future, including physical changes and changes in use and activities, while also questioning the relationship between the architect and the user. How much power does the architect have when deciding how a space will be used?

Visual storytelling allows the architect to project different future possibilities and uses, since stories can both represent architecture and the human activities that happen within, all the stories, memories and meanings that the users give to spaces. Using stories, the architect can be more suggestive, less authoritative, letting the user imagine and interpret different ways of occupying and using spaces, erasing the barrier between the expert architect and the non-expert user. Using a graphic narrative allowed me to include the factor of time in the architectural process, projecting different future possibilities on the site. The unpredictability on how users will behave should be taken into account when designing a building, allowing it to absorb future uses and adapt to changing conditions. Building the unfinished enforces the architect to project multiple actions onto the building, in order to test them for their openness to appropriation.

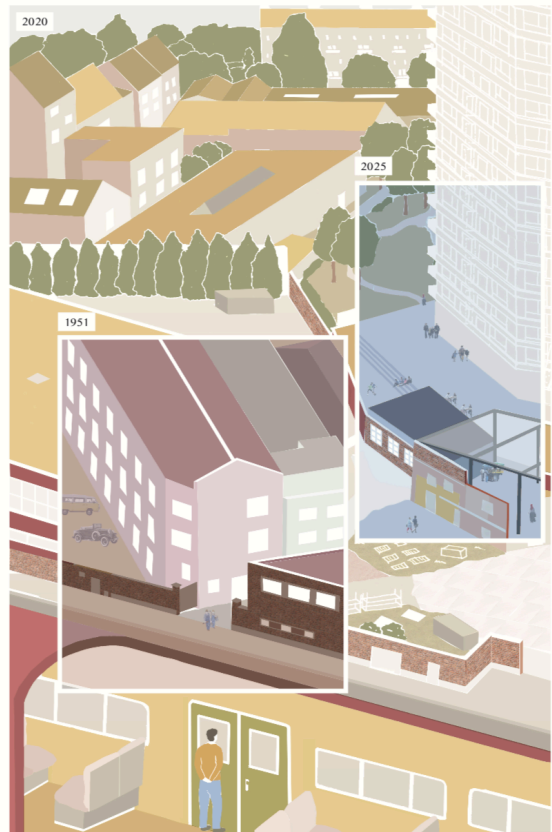
The project is conceived as an accumulative, step-by-step way of creating architecture. Therefore, the intervention on the site happens in phases over time. The building work continues, responding to chance occurrences and unexpected opportunities and possibilities, adding to a story that will never be complete. The intervention on the site is designed with a look into the future, allowing for the buildings to transform again in the future if needed. The architect continues what others have started, writing a chapter in a book that does not have an ending. Like a book that gets passed from hand to hand over the years, writing the story of the neighbourhood as it evolves and changes.

When approaching Gare du Midi by train, passengers can observe the different fragments that compose the site. Traces of history are visible on the courtyard, how were they originated? What was there before? The imposing appearance of the social housing block Les Goujons catches the spotlight, but there is a lot more than that. A strong industrial past, an uncertain future, social and spatial fragmentation...



1951 - Fromagerie Bel
 What now looks like a collage of patches on the open courtyard, were the floors of Fromagerie Bel, built in 1948, and demolished in 1992.

2025 - New public spaces
 The former warehouses could be opened up and turned into public spaces, linking the space around Les Goujons with the former industrial courtyard, creating open, visible spaces that can be used and appropriated by the neighbours.



Extracts from the graphic narrative produced during the research seminar – The image above displays the current situation of the site, while the image below overlaps snippets of what the site looked like in 1951, and what it can become in 2025.

Method and approach

During the first quarter of the graduation studio, the given method by the studio was predominant, with guidelines on what the students were supposed to look at, observe and study. During the period leading to P1, the studio worked in groups, in order to facilitate the fieldwork research, and to create collective knowledge that we could all benefit from in the later phases. In my opinion, this was a really positive way to start the studio, since it allowed us to produce and obtain a lot of knowledge on the site, gaining a deep understanding of the context we were going to intervene on. Each group had a topic to focus on, and all the collective research came together at the end in the form of an exhibition that collected, and shared with everyone all the research obtained by each group.

On the stages leading to P2, the students worked in small groups of two, to come up with an urban proposal for the site. In this phase, we were encouraged to follow our own interests, and to focus on a specific part of the site that we found interesting. Parallel to that, we were also doing our individual research as a side project. For the research seminar, we had complete freedom in choosing a topic of our own interest, with the research method that we thought was appropriate for it, always under the guidance and mentorship of our professors. The individual research helped shape our individual architectural projects, within the overarching theme of the studio, *spolia*.

In my individual project, the existing becomes the *spolia*, and is transformed to acquire new meanings, through different strategies and degrees of intervention. In order to be able to deal with the existing, it was important to have a deep understanding of what is there. Prior to the beginning of the design process, an extensive documentation of the site was carried out, in the form of photographs and drawings. I used it as a base for the design process. This was new for me, since I had never worked so extensively with the existing, with such a deep site analysis. Another aspect that was new for me was making the users, and the social issues of the site, one of the centre points of my design process.

My personal research, with the creation of the graphic narrative, served as a starting point for the design process, since it allowed me to project different possibilities in the form of a visual narrative, while also illustrating the traces of time and transformation on the site, which I find of significant value. Since the research was already site specific, the beginning of the design process happened quite organically, putting the findings into practice.

The design process started by considering the existing as containers of space, which allowed me to start envisioning the possibilities of connecting these spaces, opening them up to the public and transforming them into public spaces, spaces for the neighbours to use and appropriate. At an urban level, these transformations have the aim of connecting the fragments of the block, creating a dialogue between them, while also preserving the singular identities of each. The project is centred on a strip of the block adjacent to train tracks that presents significant underuse and deterioration, and proposes an urban development in phases, focused on gradually incorporating all the underused spaces into the urban fabric, allowing circulation within the urban block and revitalizing the different buildings on the strip, which have potential to become catalysers for change in the neighbourhood.

At an architectural level, the main focus of the project is on the transformation of the warehouse that was formerly the chocolate factory Leonidas. It is currently being temporarily used by different enterprises and workshops, since the municipality is planning on demolishing it to give space for housing and commercial spaces. The project aims to upgrade the building (and surroundings) through different strategies and degrees of intervention, in phases within a time span of 10 years.

The chair of Urban Architecture studies medium-sized sites that are inaccessible for the regular tools of urbanism, and where expectations of urban design can only be fulfilled by architecture. Adding a building means (re)-designing an environment. In my case, the intervention is not solely about adding a new building; it is about transforming the existing buildings, giving them a new meaning – by addition and removal of elements. The transformation of the existing is a way of redesigning the context, seeing value on what is

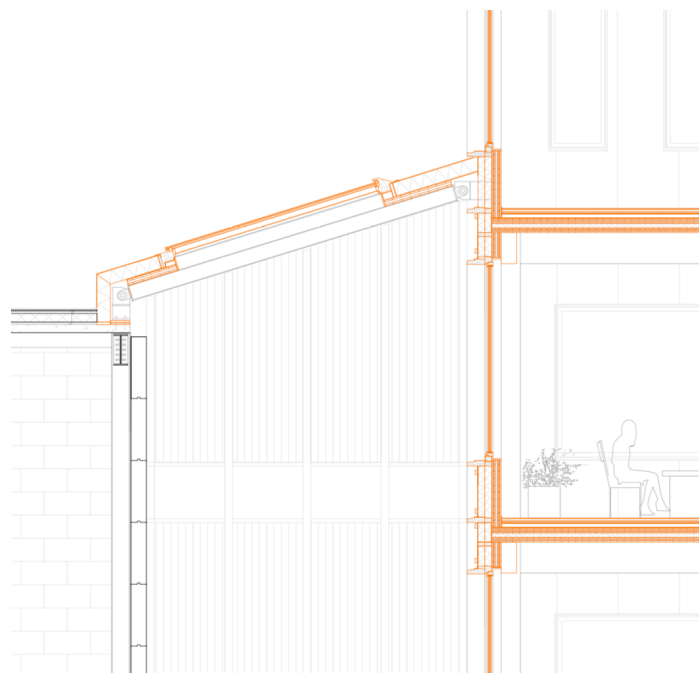
there, and what it can become. The approach of the studio served as a base to build on my own personal approach, it encouraged me to find alternative ways of urban design and to work with the existing, which provides opportunities in the design process that a blank page could not provide. The arbitrariness of the existing often translates to architectural forms full of opportunities and meaning.

Social relevance, context and challenges

The project deals with the factor of time, and aims for unfinished architecture – unfinished in the sense that it is part of a continuous process over time, allowing changes of use, and future transformations to happen, achieving a degree of freedom of use and the possibility to absorb change. It represents an example of dealing with the existing, adding to the general discourse of the reuse of existing structures and building materials. It tests the possibility of gradually transforming a site, and a building, in phases over time, and it also stresses the importance and the value that the existing can have. When you take a close look of what is there, you can discover its not so apparent value, and the possibilities of transforming it. With the lack of space in cities nowadays, the scarcity of resources and the amount of material waste that the construction industry generates, it is relevant to study, and embrace, the reuse of existing structures and building materials, and finding ways of designing for future change and adaptability.

When coming up with an architectural proposal, I came across the dilemma of how adequate my proposal was for the social context of the site many times, questioning my authority, or right, to decide what needs to be done on the site. It was never my goal to force, or determine, how the spaces I propose should be used – something that can be difficult when as part of the graduation project, students are supposed to determine a specific program for the project. The spaces are generic yet specific, and can suggest certain uses but are never restricted to one particular use.

Defining the different strategies for transformation was also challenging, dealing with tectonic and material relationships between the old and new, as well as the technical complications that come with it. The approach of trying to keep as much as possible from the existing required me to take a very careful, sensitive approach towards the site, with attention to detail. The relationship between existing and new and the transformation of the existing in phases, required careful consideration of technical aspects and presented some challenges along the way.



Detail section of where the existing (in black) and the new (in orange) meet

Conclusion

The current stage of the design process shows the potential of transforming a building and its surroundings in phases, and serves as an answer to the initial questions posed at the beginning of the design process: How can an architectural intervention deal with the social and spatial fragmentation of the site? What is the potential of transforming the existing – and what is its value? The goal of the project was to explore the possibilities of transforming the existing, through different strategies and scales of intervention – incorporating the factor of time and the possibility for future changes into the design process. The proposal connects the fragments on the site, providing the neighbours with spaces to be, to occupy. The transformation of the former factory into a civic centre adds value to the building and puts it back again in the centre of the block, as an essential piece of the site and its surroundings, and of the life of the neighbourhood.

Throughout the design process, many opportunities were discovered while observing the existing and exploring different relationships between typologies, structures and programs. Some were unexpected, some were intentional, and some were there already. The final outcome results from the research, analyses, observations and the set goal of the project, which were all triggered by the initial research questions posed at the beginning of the process. The chosen method for the research and design, lead to a design proposal that provides an example of how all these questions can be answered in the form of an architectural proposal. This proposal represents a phase, or a stage, of what the site could become in the next ten years, and is left to the forces of time to determine how it will be used in the future, or if it will be modified to adapt to new uses and needs. It represents a chapter of the unfinished book that tells the story of the site.

In the final stages of the graduation project, I hope to refine the visualizations and graphic representation of the project, as well as finalizing the materialization and details of both the exterior and the interior of the building, being able to showcase a series of representative spaces of the project that present different characters and atmospheres – which happen where the existing and the new meet.