

Reflection P3/P4

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An exploration on Intimacy, in theory and design

This graduation project started with a period that focussed entirely on research. This first semester we needed to concern ourselves with creating a research method for the project about the theme of this graduation year: "The Intimate City".

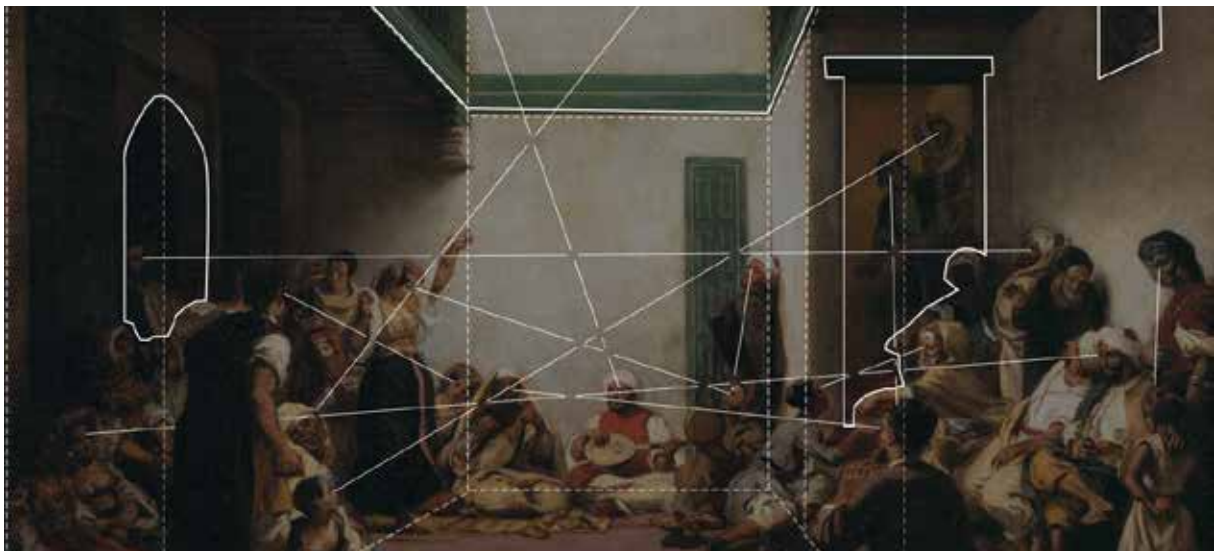
In the very beginning of this project we had discussions among our graduation studio and had to organise ourselves in research groups. Each of these groups explored a different way of presenting the research done on Intimacy. This was a first encounter on how to implement and use research as a tool for design. We were encouraged to implement the research in the design process of the second semester. With the course "Research Methods" we were taught about the different available methods that could be used for the research during our graduation. During this period I collected a big amount of knowledge concerning "the intimate city" by reading literature on this subject and by exploring it architecturally by making models of possible "intimate city rooms".

Later on our focus moved toward the city Antwerp. We were brought in connection with intimate places in the city and made to think of how they relate to the bigger theme of this graduation year.

These places were still in the back of our minds at the moment that we were each supposed to choose a site in Antwerp that would lend itself for a design exercise. This was the moment when research on the location became necessary for developing a building for the chosen site.

My experience in the school of architecture is that it is often hard to continue to spend the same amount of energy on research as one has to give to design. During the design process itself the research often moves to the background.

In the end, some explorations on literature done before P2 proved to be difficult to implement in my actual design. For example, I read into metaphysical architecture which seemed to be an interesting topic to research upon. While this was an interesting excursion of information, in the end the site of my project and my accompanied design did not lend themselves to be an expression of metaphysics. This moment proved me that not all the research done (on architecture) was going to be relevant for the final project and that I could have assessed better what subject to spend time on in the beginning of the process.



Analysis drawing of Delacroix' "Jewish wedding"; This is a perfect example of what I like to call "Collective intimacy"

After the P2 and its critique it became clear that I was too concerned with the site of my project, instead of its surroundings. That is why after this I did not only start to research the surroundings, but also future projects that were being planned in the context of my site. Thus, I tried to focus less on the heritage and the site and more on the urban neighbourhood.

The course of interiors asks a great dedication for architecture and the detail from its students. Designing a building itself is a long process of trial and error. This meant sometimes that external research seemed a little less relevant than the development of the project itself. Next time there is an opportunity for me to conduct research in a design project I would like to treat both in equal extend.

Architecture in Delft in its many forms

During my masters on Architecture in Delft I have switch a lot of times between the several movements and studios available. I have done this because I had several interests and wanted to learn as many different things possible to me. Therefore I started of with a project on the "Heritage" studio, move on to "Dwellings" and ended up at "Interiors, buildings, Cities". The latter of these studios interested met the most, as it was about the human scale and the experience of our build environment. This did not mean though, that I did not bring other interests to this particular course.

Indeed, my interests for older and historically important buildings from the Heritage studio I transferred to my graduation project. This transference was done by choosing a heritage site in Antwerp. The history of the place interested me very much and therefore my research developed more to the research that would be done by a historian on architecture.

This turned out to be a very interesting process where I try to combine the spirit of the place with the experience of people. Therefore I am telling a story about the past, while being concerned with the public of today.



Still from William h. Whyte's "the social life of the street";
An analysis on why this hotspot in the city is popular for people

The methods of research

The research that I did can be divided in a theoretical part and a practical part. The theoretical body of knowledge consisted of research done with the help of literature. The books that I used were written by architects as well as urbanists, sociologists and historians. Writers like Richard Sennett did research on the "Intimate city" a long time before us. Therefore we can learn a lot from their findings on the subject and how we can position ourselves to it. In the end, some of this information got lost in the process. While educative, some of the literature that I looked into did not find its expression in my final design. Furthermore, I would have liked to write more about my research. This would have transferred the knowledge better to me and my research would have been more complete. A big amount of this knowledge did get into my project journal which is a positive note.

I also paid a lot of attention to contemporary and non-contemporary artists and architectural precedents. Dutch painters from the 16th century for example explored the subject of intimacy very visually and architectural tricks that enhance intimacy are used as long as the field of architecture exists. Therefore these were very interesting resources to learn from. Take for example the painting from Eugène Delacroix which encouraged me to see how architectural environments could affect a concept like "collective intimacy". The practical-based research consisted of several methods: interviewing, observational studies and architectural experiments. The fieldwork in Paris that we needed to do for our first presentation at the "Assembly" proved very useful for my investigation on intimacy. Here, I analysed the people throughout a day in the Palais Royal. This informed me on the relationships between people, time and place in a very hands-on manner. Furthermore, I made a small photographic profile of Antwerp and the close neighbourhood of my site. I looked at the place in the same way I did at the gardens of the Palais Royal.

The first thing I did when I chose a site for my project was visit it. And with this visit I also made an appointment with the people that were responsible for the current complex to get first-hand information about it. My interview with Wim, the administrator of the Zuiderpershuis, was indeed very fruitful and did not only tell me about the possibilities of the site, but also informed me on the bigger political and cultural context of Antwerp and even Belgium.

For our presentation moment at the P2 we were supposed to explore the possibilities of the city room architecturally. We were to do so by designing a model of a "City Room". This meant that we very carefully had to look at our own conceptions on intimacy. By being forced to realise this conception, I was triggered in a very useful way to think of practical applications that would lead to intimacy in the city.

Finally, I did some writing exercises for myself to be able to grasp what my project was about and what intimacy meant. Especially the little piece I wrote (and drew) on the Labrouste Library in Paris proved to be very informative. It forced me to name moments where intimacy occurs and at what moment I think intimacy takes place.



Fieldwork done by me; the Palais Royal gardens and its people throughout a day in the city



A professional framework

First of all I would like to discuss the method of thinking through making. It is an extremely relevant way of research and exploration on how to design. However, if you lack a certain framework of the subject it is sometimes difficult for a student to think and make at the same time. For myself, for example, it would be better to first really dive into a certain concept before making models or even undertaking anything practical. In my graduation there were moments where I could not pay enough attention to either thinking or making.

During my interview (and out of personal experience) I found out that there is a lack of care for cultural functions in cities in policies from the government. By researching more on how to make these functions more popular, although they do not directly create a certain economical value, one can influence the amount of attention that will be paid to cultural complexes like the Zuiderpershuis.

With this project I wanted to not only do a research on intimacy, as was asked from us, but also an exploration on how to handle heritage architecture in the future. While I am very concerned with architecture that tells us about our precedents, this means that my graduation project also represents me as an architect. By making a very precise exploration of the place and the building itself, the architect will be able to make design decisions which are very closely related to the heritage and even enhance its position in the city.

This research to the value of the site should of course be done by every kind of future architecture project. It will result in architecture with a knowledge of the place and therefore will increase not only the environment but also itself.

Evaluation of the process

Like I already mentioned it was not always easy to determine what information was relevant for my end result. This meant that I sometimes strayed a little too far from my actual subject and my final goal. This proved some difficulties for me timewise, as I could have written down more information of relevant sources instead of searching for the right sources.

Some parts of my research proved to me more useful than others. For example my interview with Wim was more informative than any piece of literature that I found about the site. This made me wonder why I had never had to do it before. To actually go the first source of information and conduct fieldwork. In my opinion architecture students are disconnected from the 'real world'. During our studies we are confronted almost only with architects and experts on architecture. While this is obviously very useful for a job later on, I am convinced architects can learn a lot from people and laymen. A good example is Wim who is so aware of the Antwerp and its cultural state of mind, he has valuable information that I otherwise would have never found. The other cooperation that I was very satisfied with, was the one with the anthropologist Leek Reinders. He gave a very interesting different perspective on people and designing for people. In my opinion external experts, like anthropologists should be introduced more in our field of study.

Attachments

The library table, an island in a sea of knowledge

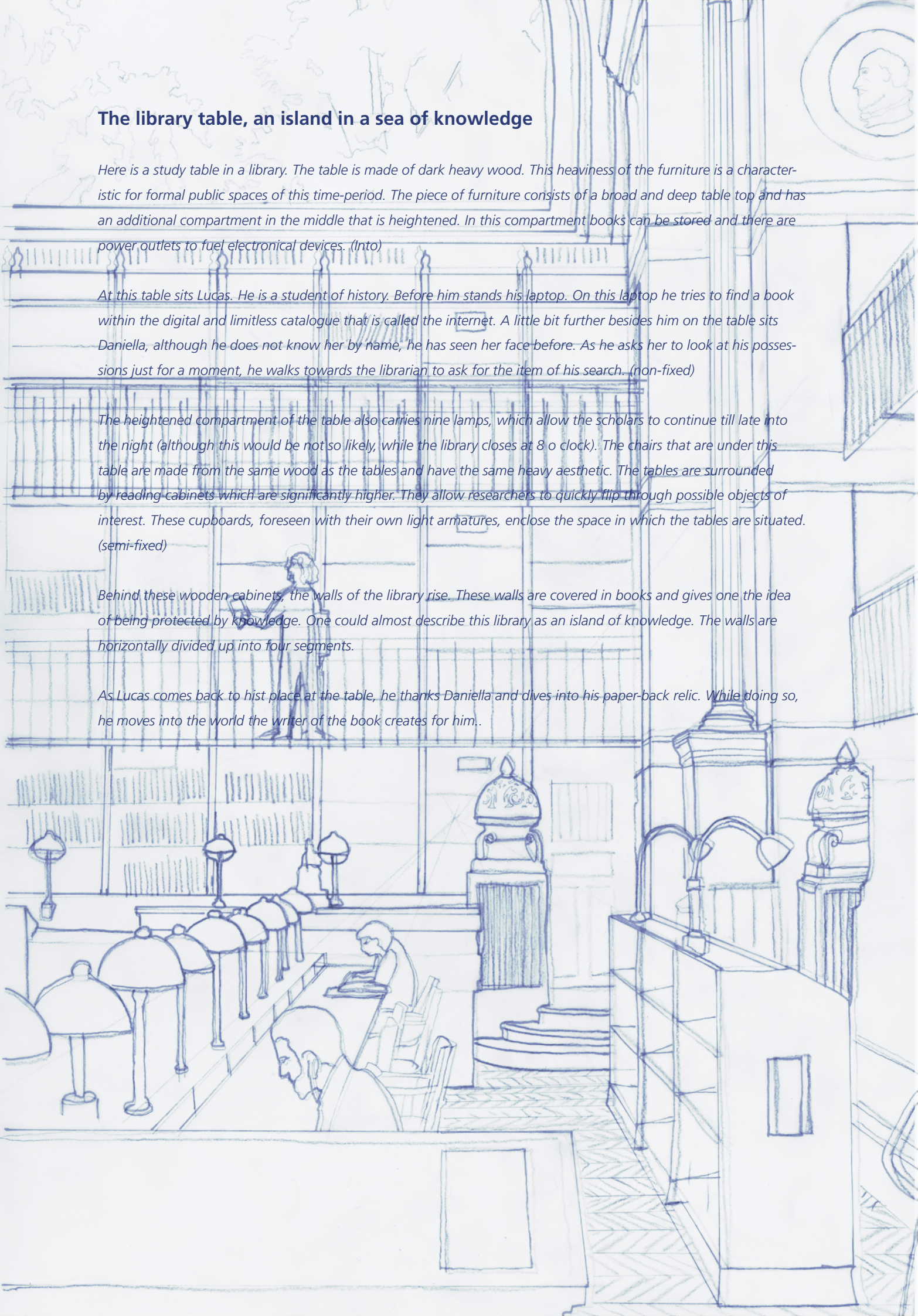
Here is a study table in a library. The table is made of dark heavy wood. This heaviness of the furniture is a characteristic for formal public spaces of this time-period. The piece of furniture consists of a broad and deep table top and has an additional compartment in the middle that is heightened. In this compartment books can be stored and there are power outlets to fuel electrical devices. (Into)

At this table sits Lucas. He is a student of history. Before him stands his laptop. On this laptop he tries to find a book within the digital and limitless catalogue that is called the internet. A little bit further besides him on the table sits Daniella, although he does not know her by name, he has seen her face before. As he asks her to look at his possessions just for a moment, he walks towards the librarian to ask for the item of his search. (non-fixed)

The heightened compartment of the table also carries nine lamps, which allow the scholars to continue till late into the night (although this would be not so likely, while the library closes at 8 o'clock). The chairs that are under this table are made from the same wood as the tables and have the same heavy aesthetic. The tables are surrounded by reading cabinets which are significantly higher. They allow researchers to quickly flip through possible objects of interest. These cupboards, foreseen with their own light armatures, enclose the space in which the tables are situated. (semi-fixed)

Behind these wooden cabinets, the walls of the library rise. These walls are covered in books and gives one the idea of being protected by knowledge. One could almost describe this library as an island of knowledge. The walls are horizontally divided up into four segments.

As Lucas comes back to his place at the table, he thanks Daniella and dives into his paper-back relic. While doing so, he moves into the world the writer of the book creates for him..

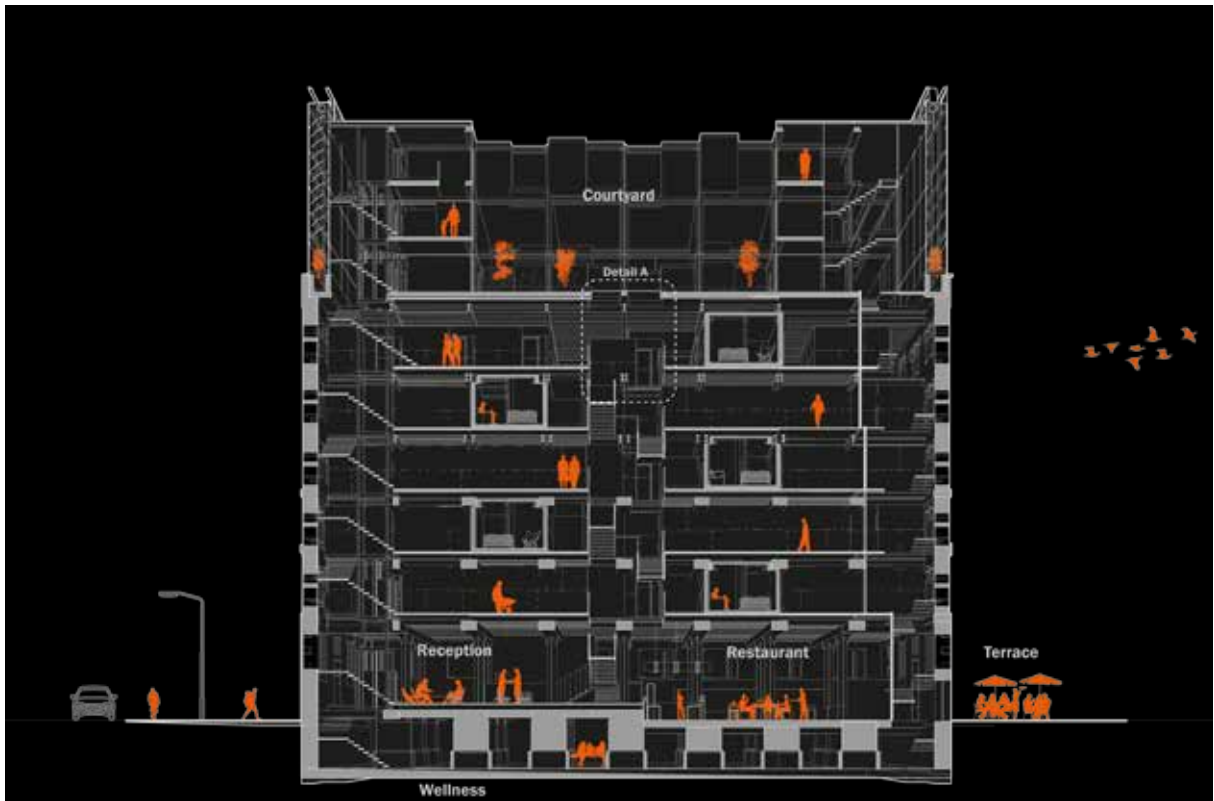
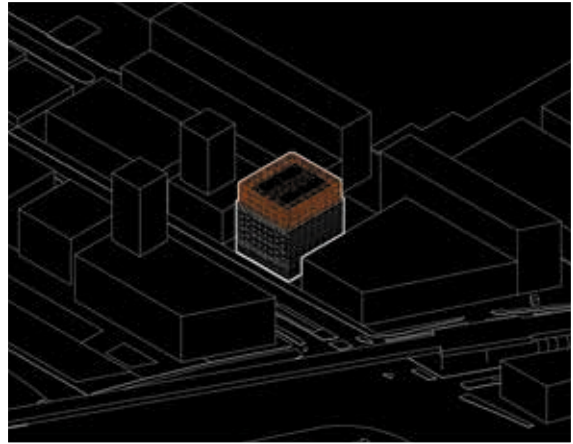


A writing exercise of 100 words

This project is about the revitalization of the cultural center: "the Zuiderpershuis". The complex of buildings is marked as a heritage site and represents an important part of the city of Antwerp and its history as an industrial harbor city. The current lack of used space on the site and its seclusion from the city fabric prevent the place from presenting itself as relevant place to the public of the city.

By attaching, renovating and refurbishing this complex will become relevant in culture, program and create economical value. This is all done while honoring the idea and history of this building complex. Only then it can once again aspire to be a place that brings together people interested in the arts and crafts, but also many more.





My first project during my masters on architecture on heritage; a refurbishment of an old warehouse in Rotterdam