

REFLECTION

REINTERPRETING THE ELEPHANT RECLAIMING CRAFT IN THE CITY

As an architectural student with a passion for industrial architecture, I eagerly enrolled in the Urban Architecture graduation studio. The studio focused on a post-industrial city, where I would have the opportunity to work with both the existing industrial structures and the city's industrial history. I had always been captivated by the simplicity and impact of industrial buildings on their surroundings, and I was particularly interested in finding ways to preserve their architectural value in modern society.

However, upon arriving at the site, I was somewhat disappointed. There were fewer industrial buildings than I had anticipated, and those that were present were either occupied or lacked the fascination I sought. Nevertheless, I chose to shift my perspective and view this as a chance to explore the existing structures and the unique character of the post-industrial city. Although I had a strong interest in the material culture of architecture, I decided to delve into the "invisible city" - the hidden aspects behind closed facades. While this research provided valuable insights and a fresh perspective, I felt that I was missing out on the architectural aspect of the site, particularly the materials used. Meanwhile, another group in the studio, called Urban Mining, focused their research on the industrial buildings and their remnants.

To my surprise, the Urban Mining group made an intriguing discovery. By zooming out from the street view to a bird's-eye view, they uncovered a network of hidden industrial ruins, which they termed "Unidentifiable Possibly Industrial Complexes" (U.P.I.C.). These structures, resembling elephants, revealed only their trunks when viewed from the street, while their massive bodies were concealed within the building blocks. This revelation sparked my curiosity for these industrial buildings once again, as it offered a new perspective



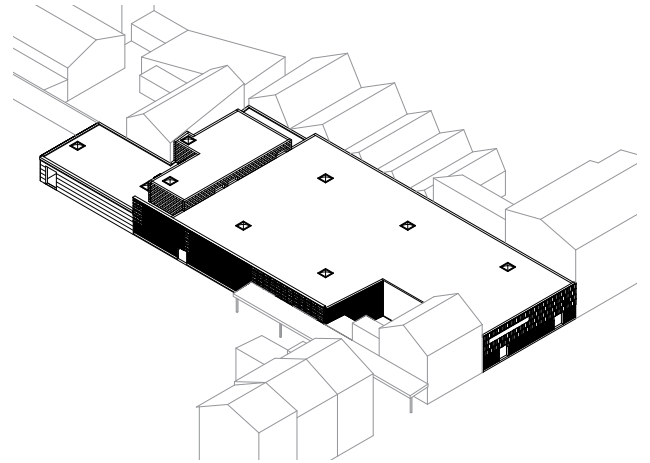
on the site. Now, not only did I have the opportunity to explore the genius loci of the city, but I could also examine the remains of the post-industrial city- hidden industrial complexes and their architectural significance.

My fascination with industrial materials stems from their purpose-driven nature and unmatched aesthetic value. To incorporate these materials into my design, I partnered with Thijs, who shared my interests, to explore abandoned industrial ruins on-site and investigate how their materials could be reclaimed for a new design. Our approach involved analysing four industrial complexes, meticulously cataloguing all the materials we discovered within each building. The next step was to research the methods and possibilities of material reclamation, focusing on the most commonly found materials. While this research on material reclamation proved insightful, it gradually became solely practical, focusing on the processing of reclaimed materials.

Unfortunately, I lost sight of my initial interest, which was the material culture of the post-industrial city and the integration of these industrial complexes into modern society. Stepping back from the research, I realized that my true interest lay in understanding the “elephant” – how it functions within the urban context, how it interacts with materials in relation to its surroundings, and the spatial essence of the elephant. These questions sparked a new, smaller-scale research endeavour. This realization came somewhat late in the research phase, as my focus had been overly fixated on material reclamation, which hindered my design process. While working exclusively with reclaimed materials presented its challenges, it did not align with my preferred approach to design. As I proposed a craft school, relying solely on reclaimed materials limited my architectural decisions, resulting in a design that merely mimicked existing structures without adding any architectural value or reflecting my own perspective on the material culture of the neighbourhood.



Nonetheless, the practical research with Thijs, particularly the modelling of the buildings and material allocation, answered some of my questions. During this phase, I initially viewed materials as individual elements—bricks and metal cladding defining an industrial building. However, upon reflection, I realized it was not solely about the specific materials used, but also the contrast between heavy and light materials. Metal cladding, for example, served a functional purpose by protecting the facade from weather conditions, while also creating a separation between horizontality and verticality, resulting in layered facades. Another significant finding was how the elephants functioned within the urban context. Some elephants remained concealed, hidden within the building block, detached from the street. Others revealed their structures from various angles. I observed that elephants often distanced themselves from the building line, occupying a set-back position within the block. Furthermore, different materials, colours, and measurements made it possible to perceive elephants from different angles as if the elephant was made up of different distinct buildings. However, the roof shapes and the way the buildings interacted with materials allowed for the identification of specific elephants from various angles.



One significant challenge I encountered in both my research and design process was the inaccessibility of most buildings, leaving me to rely solely on my imagination to envision their interiors and spatial essence. To gain some insight into how these elephants functioned from within and understand what these buildings lacked, I turned to references of comparable structures. Throughout my research and design journey, a central question emerged: How could I transform buildings originally designed solely for crafts (or machines) into structures that not only served crafts but also functioned as public buildings? How could the essence of the elephant be translated into a building that accommodated both machines and humans, while still integrating harmoniously within the urban context? The answer to this question is reflected in the final design, which serves as my interpre-



tation of the elephant and the material culture, as encapsulated in the title: "Reinterpreting the elephant: Reclaiming craft in the city." One crucial lesson I learned throughout this studio is the importance of taking a clear position in both the design and research processes to achieve a coherent outcome. Although it may seem obvious, themes such as material culture can be challenging to explain and require the architect's interpretation to give them a meaningful definition. The studio taught me that a design holds significant value when its core essence is carefully considered and thoughtfully developed. While anyone can design a building, it is the depth and coherence of the underlying story that truly elevates its significance.