

Architecture as a language that can bridge cultures

learning from Rossi through Vandenhove.

“No city ever lacked the sense of its own individuality” (Rossi, 1984).

The reflection is a short substantiated explanation to account for the preliminary results of the research and design in the graduation phase (product, process, planning). It contains an answer to the questions of how and why the approach to research, presented during the P2 (the choice of method (how) and argumentation (why)) did or did not work, and to what extent.

introduction relation design-research

The goal of this Graduation Project is to construct a “logic of architecture”, within the context of chosen architectural theory as well as a personal (dynamic) understanding of Liège, the site and its people. Hence, the design acts as a testsite for the research: testing, validating and showcasing the newfound “logic of architecture”, which is a product of the research process.

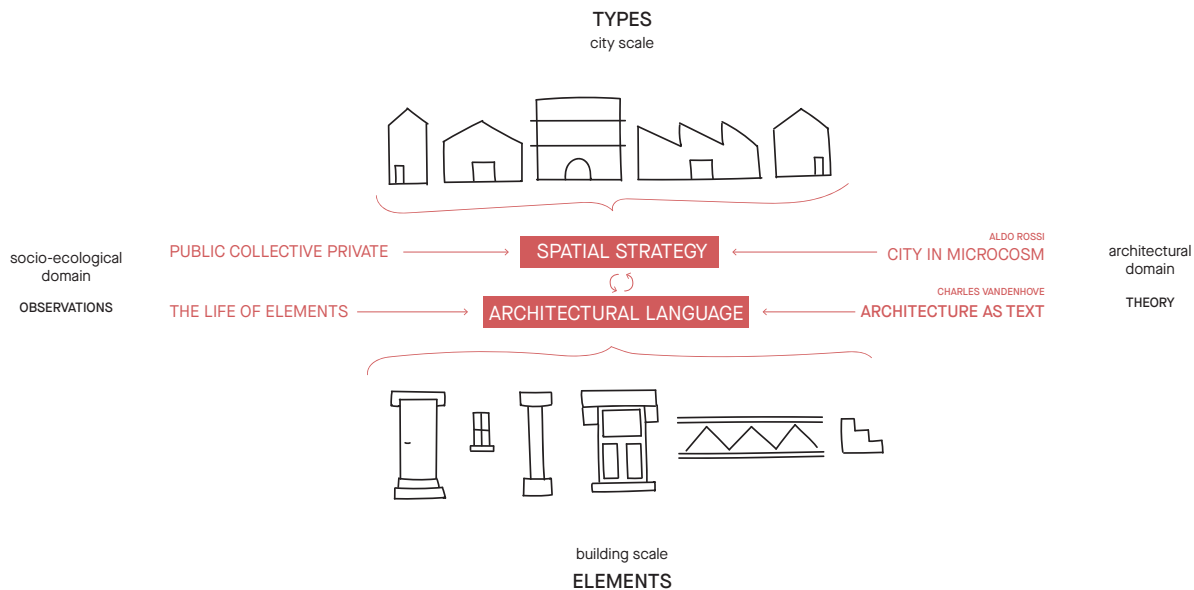


Fig 1 overview of the research approach combining two domains, and the two design and research scales

research approach

The research addresses the visible scar of city fragmentation in Liège from the perspective of two domains: the architectural domain and the socio-ecological domain. Taking the term fragmentation quite literally, regarding the city as a network of elements, investigating their relations within both the architectural and the socio-ecological domain independently before combining the findings clearly in multiple systems, rules and principles that can be applied to architecture.

In order to investigate the elements within the architectural domain, the theoretical research looks towards Aldo Rossi and Charles Vandenhove, who both have hypothesis concerning elements and form the ground for my architectural logic of autonomous architecture. Rossi's theory on type informs the spatial strategy for the design: a city in microcosm, while Vandenhove's architecture as text hypothesis, initiates a sensitivity for scale and interdependence of elements, forming the architectural language. Together they strive to answer the question: Can elements give meaning to the city, making the ordinary become meaningful?

By analysing the architectural domain, independently of the socio-ecological domain, it's possible to define a theoretical framework for both the spatial strategy as the architectural language validating the autonomous architecture. While it is clear that architecture is not autonomous from its use, function, people or culture, it is possible to understand architecture as autonomous in relation to it because architecture is a discipline with its own rules, values, formal and conceptual principles which are put forward in theories, drawings, built and unbuilt examples. Architecture has played

a vital role in shaping from the first traces of the city. Its origins are deeply rooted in the development of culture and civilization, making the history of architecture inseparable from the history of culture itself. Consequently, architecture, culture, the people, and the city share an interconnected and mutually influential relationship, each influencing and shaping the other.

Creating a space for culture, for people, is creating a space for architecture, a topic addressed by the socio-ecological domain. With this domain we address the need for collective space in order to reignite the intercultural discourse between different cultures in Bressoux. Researching the topic of collectivity and socioecology in regard to the spatial strategy, the research focusses on how elements can play a role in the transitions between public, private and collective. Socioecology and collectivity in regard to the scale of the architectural language, reads elements as dynamic and fixed at the same time, while observations of life give incentive for their manipulation. Elements can be manipulated individually as long as they contain their autonomous reading, meaning that a column will always stand and a beam always rest, but as the column has had many shapes and forms so has the beams material changed over the course of time. "As form and use changes, autonomous reading remains the same, that is the power of good architecture. Architecture can be dynamic and fixed at the same time, its life is dynamic, while its root (autonomy) is fixed." - Charles Vandenhove.

Though the research approach to both domains differs, the architectural domain primarily addressing architectural theory and the socio-ecological domain, site analysis, theory and site research enforce each other frequently, corroborating findings and initiating new hypotheses.

research products

Similarly to the poetic composition in which Vandenhove structures his buildings: words (elements) that are connected in stylistical principles (compositions) forming a larger text (building), I have structured my research products into: the dictionary (elements), the grammar (types and systems) and the story (the design). These three products refer to the three consecutive phases of the process: analysis, experimentation and design, however understandably there has been a lot of back and forth between the phases as part of the design process. To explain the three phases and thereby products of the approach we take the element window as an example.

In the first phase the window is observed as an element within the poetic composition of a building, combining site pictures with observations from which different research questions arise. The dictionary, is a visual study regarding representational elements as urban artifacts based on an approach shown in the film "The Riddle of the Sphinx" by Jeff Cornelis, showing the oeuvre of Vandenhove not as buildings, but as a catalogue existing of essential components.



Fig 2 visual study of elements, pictures pared with observations - the dictionary

By using the theoretical framework provided by Rossi and Vandenhove, an autonomous reading of the element can be composed. Simultaneously a reading of the element as part of a social ecology shows what makes the element dynamic, as opposed to the fixed situation portrayed by the autonomous reading. Both readings are based on the initial observations done in the dictionary, however a greater understanding of the element is obtained in this phase, due to the increased importance of theory and through the act of drawing and designing a lot of variables of the element. This phase of the process is called, defining the grammar and ultimately it translates into design proposals that are tested in the design, revisiting this process until the findings from the first phase can be translated into design solutions on multiple scales that serve the purpose of the design brief of the spatial strategy. For me it worked really well to have context based research questions be the ground for design choices even though I think that aspect makes the still autonomous architecture more embedded in the site than Rossi would like. However, as the research data consists of photos of elements of the site and its surroundings it is only fitting that the use of elements inform type, and thus the manipulation of the element in the design.

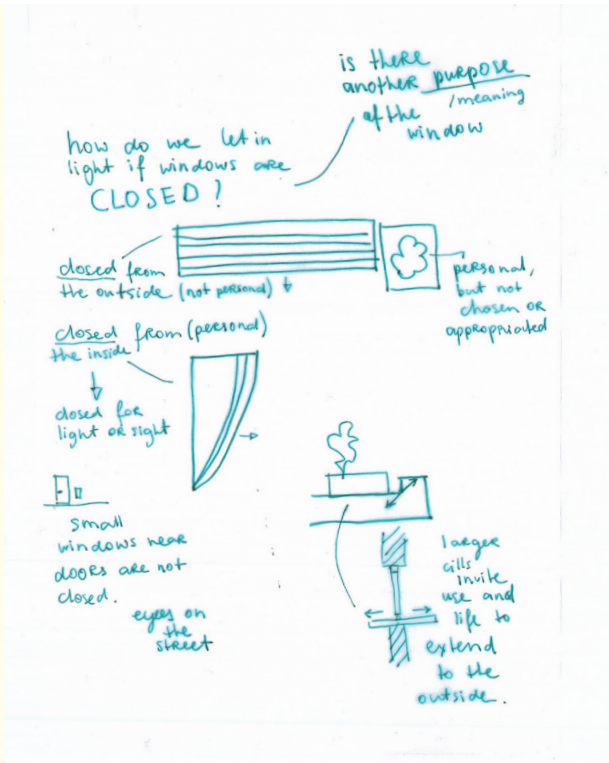
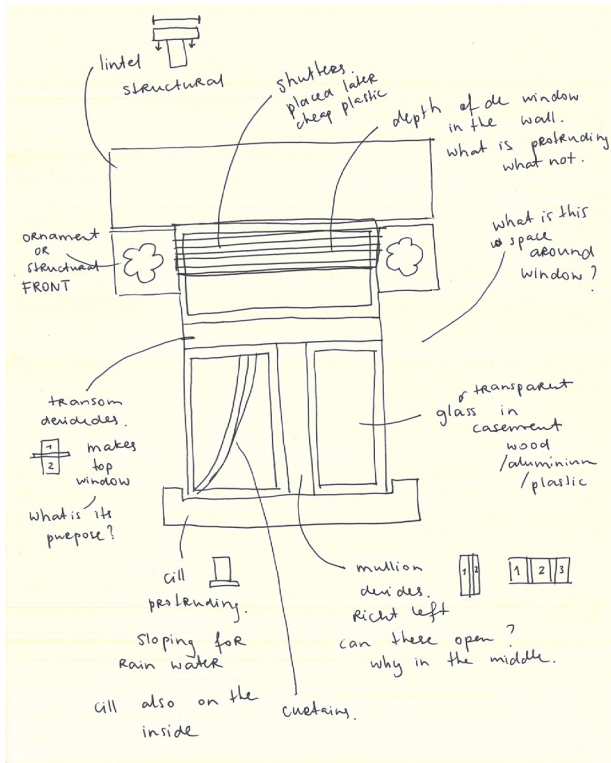


Fig 3 (left) autonomous reading of the element window - the grammar

Fig 4 (right) reading of the element as part of a social ecology. - the grammar

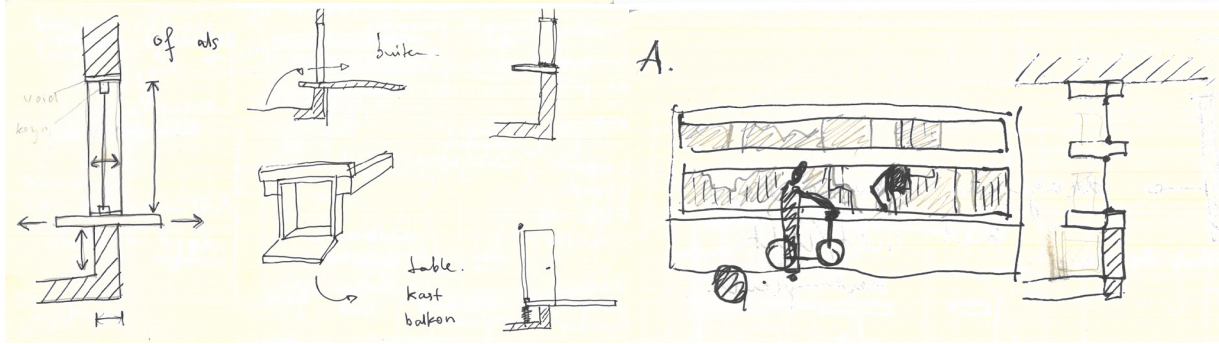


Fig 5 rules about the manipulation of the element that lead to design proposals - the grammar

The relation between spatial strategy and architectural language becomes apparent in the final phase of the research approach, the story. Showcasing the spatial strategy by means of the elements selected in the dictionary, manipulated within the rules of the grammar, and composed into a story that narrates the design. This product is still under development, and will be a project I will be continuing after p4. The story will be combining multiple views in different scales and visualisations as if recreating the memory of someone venturing through the design. Including this aspect of memory, as a way of investigating material reality relates to the role pictures have had in my initial research phase, investigating all the different elements in picture and film. An inspiration for this product is Rossi's project "Fragments", which can be read as a series of views appearing within imagination. An urban landscape consisting of familiar icons of New York, Rossi's own buildings as well as imagined projects, juxtaposed with intrusions of reality — the close flat walls of apartment buildings, ensuing a dialogue between idea and reality. A work that is both fixed and dynamic at the same time, an advocate for autonomous architecture and showcase of the design as an architectural position.

As my design is the test site for the architectural logic, developed in the research process, it showcases the elements that have stood out to me the most in the context of the chosen architectural theory as well as my personal understanding of Liège, the site and its people. Having said this, there are many different scales in which the logic could be applied to, as well as many different elements that could be investigated further. I have chosen to focus on a few elements this past half year, and by repeating the process of going back and forth between research and design, drawing up a logic and testing it in design, I've been trying to showcase my findings through multiple scales. What has been the focus as of late, and what I intend to pursue even further the coming month, is to really translate the understanding of the elements onto the level of detailing and ornaments.

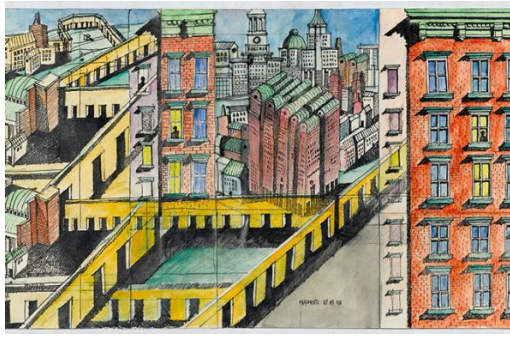


Fig 6 "Fragments" - Aldo Rossi, 1987 an inspiration for - the story

feedback

This last goal, translating these elements onto the scale of ornaments and really articulating my ideas and concepts of architecture into multiple scales, is also the feedback I have received during my P3 presentation. It has often made me feel very overwhelmed, because of the never ending task it seems to be. As my focus is both on spatial strategy (large scale design) and architectural language (small scale gestures) it has been a challenge to find a balance between the two, working out one thing in detail and choosing to not work on another thing completely. By the time I figured out my process and started the design phase, which I found to be the really fun part, it was almost time to choose the parts I wanted to focus on for the final presentation. I think I could spend double the time on the project and still have the feeling that there are more elements and systems to discover, more scales to experiment with. But, as it is a graduation project and the goal of the project was to prove my hypothesis, I think the project succeeded even without working out every element, but just by showing the possibilities with a few.

Another remark I received, refers to my choice of theory. How can a theory from the 1960s, that deals with a city that is man made, be transposed to the time that we live in now, considering the issues that we encounter now in other than human perspective. This is a difficult question, because, when assuming that architecture is autonomous, dynamic but fixed, the architectural ground should not change with time, making a theory from the 60's as relevant now as it would be in the next hundred years. However I do understand the topic of ecology may seem opposed to the hypothesis of Rossi, or maybe overlooked as he is focused solely on the architecture and not the matter that surrounds it. I personally think that there are examples of Rossi's work that do introduce a certain type of ecology in architecture. For example Fagnano Olona Elementary School, a courtyard with steps leading to a gymnasium, from which one can look toward the cylindrical library with its glazed roof. We can read this analogically and equate the gymnasium with fitness and physical health; opposite the library which is for knowledge; between these are the square and steps which is where the life of a city unfolds. The school is thus a city in microcosm, an ecology in autonomous architecture. An example of ecology when looking at architecture only within the architectural domain, in an almost laboratory setting, closed off from the outside world. For that reason, the second domain I introduced, the socio-ecological domain, understands elements as part of a larger whole, an environment. Elements become something relational, embedded, conditional as well as contextual, structured not purely by theoretical frameworks, but ordered by a social pattern, making it durable as well as livable, allowing for growth and change within clear historical principles.

As the topic of collectivity concerns people, a comment I received during P3 was whether people could become a part of the development and construction of the plan. If this were to be a real project, collectivity can start far before there is even an design, by talking to people and getting them involved in the process. However, in this graduation project we have no target group that we are building for, so we cannot design to the needs of the people. Nevertheless after speaking to Boris Zeisser, architect of the newly built cohousing project in Amsterdam, de Warren, there are ways to make collective architecture, or architecture that can be made collective by its inhabitants, without getting them involved first. For example by designing an easy construction, that can be built by the inhabitants themselves, or making spaces that invite to be personalized. We came to the conclusion that a collective space is a separate typology of space, and that involvement of people in all stages of conceiving it is fundamental in its creation and detrimental for its success. Therefore I want to show this involvement in the design as well.

personal development

Up until a few weeks ago I have always drew blank when asked about my fascination with architecture. I knew I liked designing, having the freedom to define the problem before analyzing it and providing a creative solution. However, I've always felt uneasy making design choices without having a clear argument to back it up with. In my eyes, a strong argument, needs a strong ground, such as a fact, theory or research finding. Trying to understand the intuitive choices, why I make them and what makes them "good" or "bad" has left me puzzled many times during my studies. Resulting in being unsure what kind of architect I would become in the future, or what my personal interest in architecture actually is.

Up until a few weeks ago, when I was working on my research brainstorm and I scribbled down: constructing the "logic" of architecture. I even put the word logic between quotation marks, as if its was a term taboo to architecture and wrong for me to use. I began thinking about this understanding of architecture and discovered that looking back, the quest to construct a logic of architecture was not only the overall goal of my Graduation Project, but it also defines me as an architect. My research approach is very analytical, my design directly linked to research and before even drawing a line I'm wondering what leads up to the choices I make before doing what I'm doing.

In conclusion, this year, my work has made me learn and realise a lot. I've learned that my ideas are good, I just need to articulate them in order for them to become architecture. The things that I was scared of most (designing facades and having a personal opinion on architectural theories) bring me the most joy. And that it's neither "good" or "bad" to look for a logic or a system when making design decisions, as long as you can also let go and let intuitive choices inspire your more rationalist ones. For example, choosing both Rossi and Vandenhove as a base for my theory research, was a completely intuitive choice. After visiting Hotel Torrentius in Liège, the model of Châteaux Bordeaux reminded me so much of Rossi's drawings of the Cemetery of Modena, that I felt I needed to investigate the connection between the two. Sometimes its best to get completely lost in your own thoughts, as that's the only way you can find a clear way out.

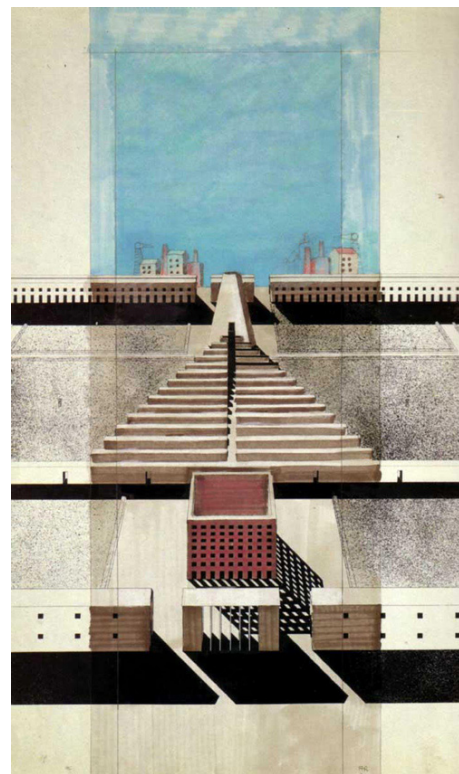
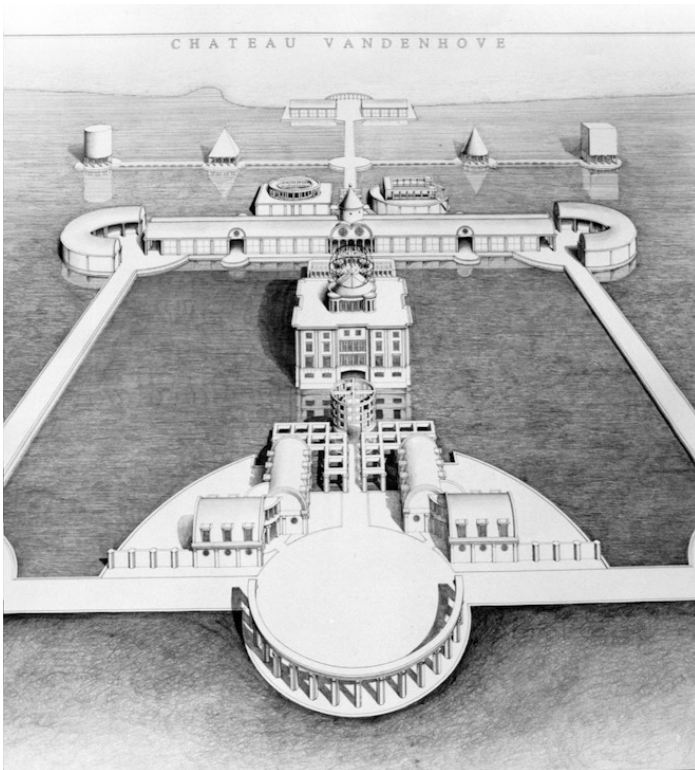


Fig 7 (left)
Chateaux
Bordeaux-
Charles
Vandenhove

Fig 8 (right)
Cemetery in
Modena - Aldo
Rossi