

Reflection on the Project

Walls that teach

Student: Chenqi Zhang

Student Number: 4895916

Studio: Urban Architecture "Spolia"

Mentors: Eireen Schreurs, Jos Lafeber, Els van Meerbeek, Leeke Reinders

Delegate Examiner: Henriette Bier

Introduction

Reflecting upon the works I've concentrated on, I found they composed an interlocking process from research to design throughout the whole year which is full of joy and challenges. In this reflection paper, I will go over the key steps I've taken, from the encounter with Urban Architecture studio to research and design, and at the end to the wider insight into social aspects. I think the reflection could be an opportunity for me to zoom out from the architecture scale at this moment and turn back to the starting point of the graduation project, which could make me a better storyteller.

Meet Urban Architecture “Spolia”

The first time the word “*Spolia*” caught my eyes was when I saw the poster of Urban Architecture, I was intrigued by its profound cultural and historical connotations, that I would like to learn more about it as my graduation project. Specifically, spolia refers to the leftovers of a building which are re-integrated in a new structure, but also to infrastructural elements, fragments of urban space, or non-material things, such as stories and memories.

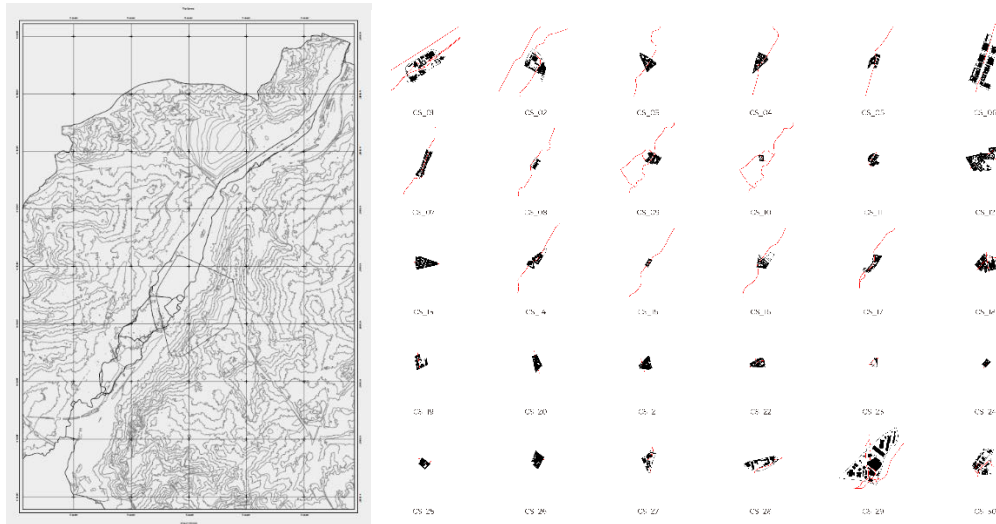
Focusing on spolia, the aim of this studio is to figure out how to deal with the existing things, zooming from the urban view. What to keep and what to build are the questions I constantly asked myself in the past months. Once existing fragments collide with new ones, the process of bricolage comes up. I feel that both urban and architectural design are the attempts to find balance and assemblage of new and old. Instead of grand strategies, Urban Architecture emphasizes a low-key attitude and small act to intervene. Actually, the most striking thing the studio hit me is the modest attitude towards the city, especially when we talk about the means of economy and a more sustainable built environment.

Research and methods

Brussels is an opportunistic city known for its inscrutable nature and political fragmentation, full of “volatile” social groups. While the site in Anderlecht is also far from picture-perfect, where there is a railway, a lost river, a big slab of social housing, some closed residential blocks but without a clear plot edge which other traditional Brussels blocks do have.

In the first quarter, we worked in groups to embark fieldwork research based on the specific topics for a more comprehensive and collective perception of such a unique site in Brussels. Different architectural research methods were tried out to research on different scales, combining with anthropology, praxeology and so on. There was a fascinating exhibition at the end of the period where all the groups could share the research products.

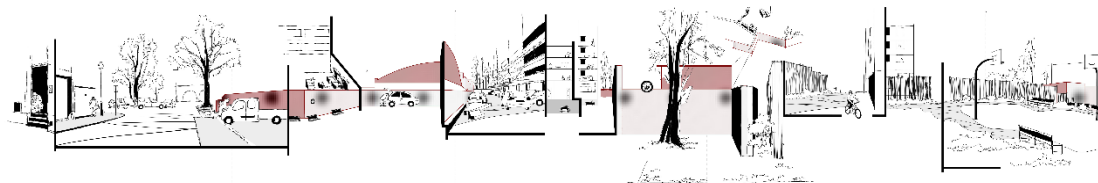
For my group concentrating on Senne, the covered river, a morpho-typological research on the invisible river was conducted, which helped summarize the various forms of river traces presented in the urban context and the ways people treat its memory. Specific to the site, the re-appropriation of memory of Senne could be the illuminating point for design, which revealed as the walls in the urban design.



Group research: Mapping and diagrams for the traces of Senne

Urban idea inspired by the ghost of the lost river – the walls

In the phase towards P2, the smaller groups need to come up with the urban proposal. Based on the research of Senne, we found that the walls on the site can be seen as spolia because the wall is one of the few remnants of the buried river and a defining character in the site social manifestation. I am convinced that the wall as a spolia elaborates on the intangible cultural value much more than materialism and aesthetic value. When it's combined with new elements to form a space, it speaks for itself, speaks for space.



Personal research: the wall meets people, though it acts as backdrop

Without a doubt that our urban group kept the wall as a spolia on site, while it plays the role of segregation and 'backdrop' of people's life currently. The task for us is to find an antidote to awake or improve its historic connotation and value which has been overlooked. In addition to the remain of the walls and their structure, we kept all houses for housing shortage and also transformed Rotor into a residential area. In order to make the wall frame the plot instead of segregating, we transformed the space against the wall into public facilities which could make the wall permeable. For the buildings that being demolished, their structural products could be reused. Eventually, we formed a denser but convenient residential area with more greenery, where the wall could act on the stage of people's life.

Urban Idea - housing block

Existing: wall as segregation (which also happens on youths)

Proposed: break the segregation, frame the plot by walls

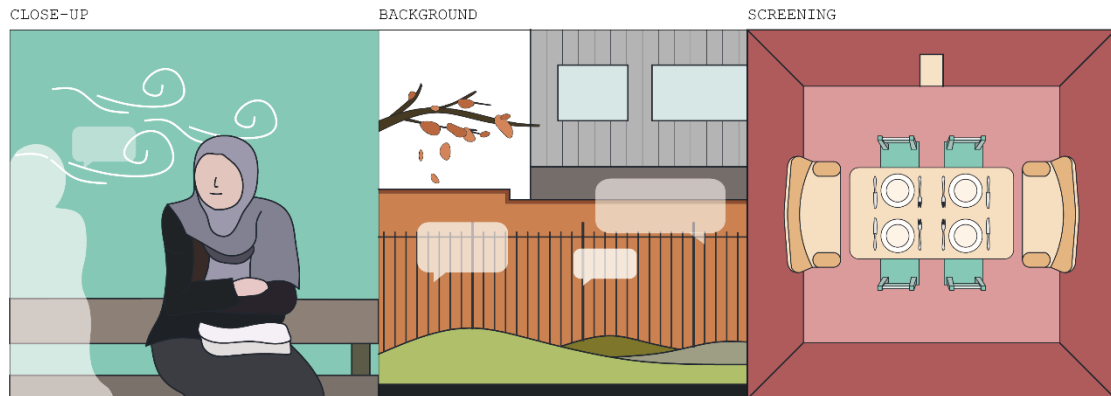


Group urban proposal: existing (left) and proposed (right)

The spolia and architectural proposal – the youth centre

Following the urban design, I fully kept the walls and begin to seek the proper program as a facility.

Switching architectural lens into the sociological lens, I used praxeological methods to do further demographic research about the people on site which help me find out the target group – youths: the economy in Anderlecht is relatively sluggish and the unemployment rate is high. There are a large number of tenants in les goujons, including a large number of immigrant youth, which may involve issues such as crime or social integration. Then I tried to clarify the relationship between my starting point – “the walls” and the youths.

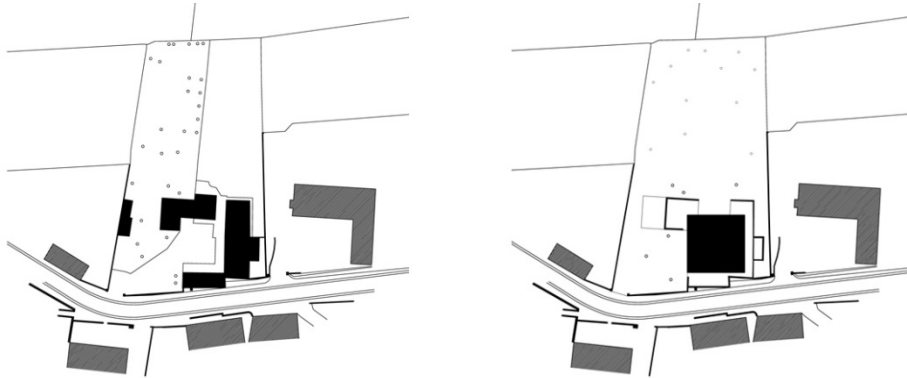


Personal research: storyboards of local youths, who meet the walls

In my project, the role of the wall is not only the ghost of Senne but also represents the youths who are facing stigmatization issues in this marginalized community. By introducing a youth centre as pedagogic space aside the walls to alleviate youth issues, I hope that the walls could also bring an educational value and become a perceptible identity of the project. It's an attempt to make the wall from segregation to integration and in the meanwhile a step to integrate youths into the community.

Furthermore, spolia is more than the wall for me. For example, the lifestyle between the front and back yards in the industrial era could be the spolia. On immaterial, I'm curious about the possibility of making the space itself as spolia representing the relaxing social networks after work or the practices of inhabitants like what happened in the industrial era before. That's why I create three different levels of courtyards by the collision between the existing walls and the new additions. In the enclosed yards, the striking contrast of old and new let the walls speak: "what you see is what you get". For the sake of leaving space for the courtyards, I didn't keep the existing buildings attaching the walls but recycle and reuse the structure. On the one hand, I can't both keep everything and create the outdoor space; and on the other hand, the choice to convey more 'fresh air' for space is more valuable than renovation of the ordinary factories to some extents.

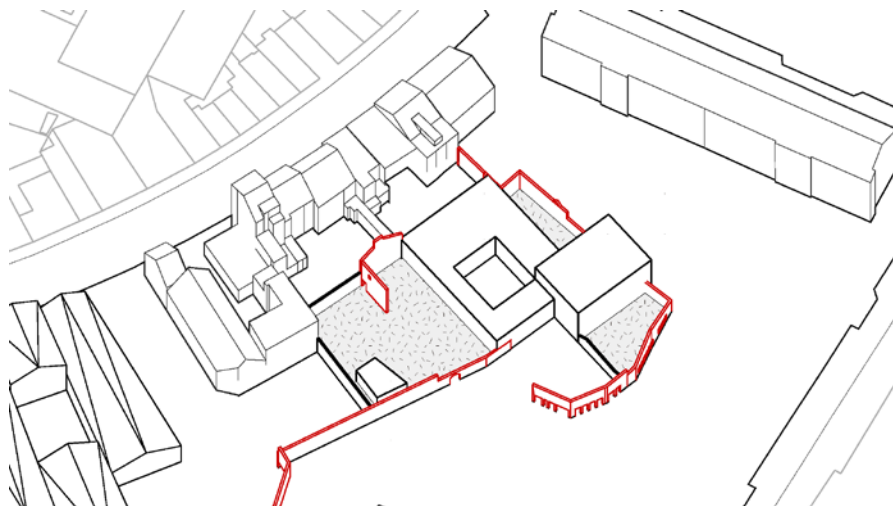
House BS by architecten de vylder vinck taillieu is a nice reference which convinced me to make this decision: The old farm is not good enough. At the same time the facades of it were good enough to be kept as garden walls for the new house. The situation is similar to my site to some extents.



Reference: *House BS by architecten de vylder vinck taillieu*

Considering the economy of means, I chose the most concise composition, the sustainable materials and reuse materials in the interior cladding, so that the internal space would have the character of spolia.

Through the preservation of the wall and the reshaping of the space along it, my aim is to seek for the opportunities to improve both social and special experience on site. I'm convinced that the spolia could be the landmark that lights up the site, where its embodied meanings that were unintelligible in the past could be highlight. The wall could tell us that it's the common identity of the plot and the youth centre, which would become people's collective memory.



Massing of conceptual architecture

Social relevance and challenges

Currently, many regions are facing issues such as loss of historical memory and demographic pressure, especially at the marginalized area similar to the project site. This is similar to what I'm facing in the graduation project: spolia and youth issues. I would like to figure out both spatial and cultural strategies as heuristic intervention in response to certain social problems and at the meanwhile keep the means of economy in my mind.

Honestly, when coming up with architectural proposals, I came across the dilemma of the balance between keep and build. Shall I keep the things on the site as much as possible then fit in the programs I need, or shall I make proper demolition and reconstruction to meet my spatial expectations? As mentioned above, I decided to highlight the walls rather than the whole building which means it's not a renovation project but a mostly new project. Of course, another completely opposite approach (which keeps all the things on site) might as well works, but that's not the attempt for me this time. I suppose such dilemmas will certainly recur during the practice as architects. Every time, we need to make appropriate judgments based on different environmental quality and economic conditions.

Conclusion

From the impression of Senne in Brussels, to the medium-scale exploration in Anderlecht, and then to my project, the interlocking process is full of critical evaluation of the urban issues. The archaeological idea of Spolia keeps me discovering the existing value, then constantly thinking of collecting, composing and re-using. The research and design methods I have chosen all lead to the design results and the unexpected surprise always come when I clarify the logic hidden among the elements. For example, the intimate relationship among Senne, walls as spolia and youth centre is what I won't expect at the beginning of my graduation project.

In the coming final phase, I would continue refining the materials, the atmosphere of the space, and the visual presentation; at the same time, I would continue research on the walls to see how it could work and present in the actual practice.