

THE ARCHITECT AND THE USER

Research Booklet

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INTRODUCTION

THE STUDIO

Urban Architecture studies medium-size urban 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 on these locations thus means (re-)designing an environment. Urban Architecture aims to contribute to a widely felt need for an ambitious engagement, theoretical and practical, to develop new concepts, methods and practices of thinking and doing architecture.

Architecture grows out of an awareness that designing a building always means creating and influencing the surrounding environment. It is about critically reading and assessing a given situation, in order to either complete or re-direct it by adding a building. Urban Architecture focuses on the position of the building relative to existing structures, its role in delineating private, public and collective realms, the city's different scales and material relationships.

The theme of the Urban Architecture Graduation Studio is spolia, a term from archeology that defines the left-overs of a building that find themselves back in a new structure [Fig. 1]. Spolia can be differentiated into spolia in se, which refers to the use of actual elements; and spolia in re, which evokes the use of older images, motifs or memories. Spolia exceeds materials and it can also be understood as social networks, practices of inhabitants or cultural expressions. 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 first gain a comprehensive understanding of what is there, material or immaterial.

Fig. 1. Hellenistic or Roman pillar built into the window of a chapel on Astypalea, Greece

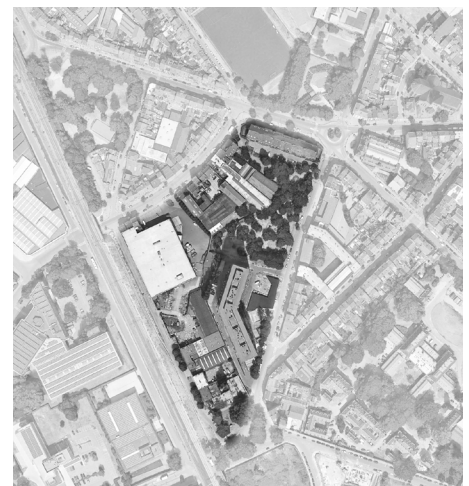


THE SITE

The selected site for the project is located in Anderlecht, a neighbourhood in the south-west of Brussels. [Fig. 2] It presents both social and morphological complexity, with different buildings and social groups all coexisting within the same site. Once an urban block with a predominant industrial function, the site has undergone a series of transformations over time that have caused fragmentation, both social and spatial, and a unique mixture of elements.

The site is home to an architecture practice, Rotor, that sells buildings materials harvested from demolition sites. They are temporarily occupying a large warehouse that used to be a chocolate factory, now waiting to be demolished in the near future. There is also Les Goujons, a large social housing block that takes the spotlight on the site. It was built in the 1970's, and it is visible from many parts of the city due to its height and strong presence. The characteristic shape of the building is due to the passage of the Senne river underground, which is now covered and invisible. This challenging site presents interesting dynamics, relationships and challenges.

Fig. 2. The selected site in Anderlecht



RESEARCH TOPIC

The chosen topic for this research seminar is the relationship between the architect and the user, going through a wide range of different topics within the overarching theme of the architect and the user.

One of the first findings during our fieldwork on the site was observing how people occupied the public space, often in unexpected ways, showing different ways of appropriating the spaces. [Fig. 3] Even though the site lacks public spaces for the neighbours to use, people always find spots where they can spend time, socialize or carry out other activities. These observations of people interacting with the built environment made me question the relationship between what the architect decides to design, the intended use, and the way people actually end up using the spaces that architects design. Who decides how spaces are used, the architect or the user? Where does the work of the architect end, when users start appropriating the spaces, changing its uses and meanings?

This research booklet will touch on topics such as power relations, the social meaning of architecture, proxemics as a way to understand the way people interact with the built environment, appropriation and the creative user, and it will look into how drawings and storytelling as a method for architectural production can become a tool that brings the architect closer to the public, putting both in an equal position.

Fig. 3. An example of appropriation of the public space on the site



PROXEMICS

The relationship between people and space

Proxemics deal with the relationship between people and space, it is an epistemic framework that analyzes how humans use space. As Jones states in *Proxemics: The Language of Space*, it is possible to alter social interactions by, for example, “moving the furniture in a room in different arrangements”. An architectural intervention, or any modifications in spatial qualities, can change social behavior.

The chosen approach felt adequate as a way of understanding the problematic of the site, which is both spatial and social fragmentation, to see where and how an architectural intervention could increase social interaction and reduce fragmentation. My aim is to intervene on the site from a sensitive understanding that adequately responds to the problematic.

Although it might be changing, we can still often find architecture practices that are detached from the realities of the site they are working on, and end up making assumption-based decisions that are not supported by any research. With the increasing complexity found in cities nowadays, it is of significant relevance as an architect to have an accurate, deep understanding of the place before intervening on it.

The term proxemics was initially introduced in 1963 by Edward T. Hall, a cultural anthropologist, in his book *The Hidden Dimension* [Fig. 6]. According to the author, the term proxemics “is used to define the interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of space”, and it can be uncovered through observations and analysis. In the book, Hall describes three types of spaces in proxemics manifestations: fixed-feature, semi-fixed feature, and informal space. The first one refers to buildings or the urban context, which are the cast in which a significant part of behavior is formed; the second one refers to the furniture or interior arrangements, which can have a measurable effect of behavior; and the last refers to the spatial experience of an individual. The observation of behavior in these three different scales can reveal how different spatial configurations encourage certain behaviors, and inform the researcher on what kind of solutions can be applied to improve certain situations. Other than in the field of architecture and design, proxemic studies can be relevant in a diverse range of fields, such as technology, advertising, psychology, cinema and anthropology.

Fig. 6. Cover of *The Hidden Dimension* by Edward T. Hall



THE ARCHITECT AND THE USER

A RELATION OF POWER

In Marieke Berkers' lecture on Investigating Spatial and Social Practices, the issue of the authority of architects over users was posed. In one of the recommended readings for that lecture, Jonathan Hill's *The Use of Architects*, the authoritarian, modernist tradition of the architect as a form-giver, creator and controller of human environments is highly questioned. The first position that I take is that architecture is a practice that is equally spatial and social, and that the use cannot be fully predicted or imposed by the architect. The architect should never have an invasive, deterministic attitude towards defining how a building will be used. To what extent is the architect the author of an architectural project, when users have appropriated the spaces and changed its uses and meanings? Some of the findings from my research show that even though the way spaces are designed affects the use, users still find ways of adapting them to their needs.

The studio of Urban Architecture advocates for an architecture that anticipates uses and fosters experience, and sees the city as an assemblage of sites, materials, networks and places. Some questions about ownership, control and occupation rights are posed, which led me to question the relationship between architecture, social order and power. As Jones argues, "architectural production is a political practice that has deep-rooted connections with social order". Was it a political decision to physically fragment the site in Anderlecht to separate certain social groups? From a personal point of view, architecture is part of a larger field that includes social, cultural, institutional and political issues. Architecture has a social function, be it positive or negative. The incorporation of proxemic studies, through observation and analysis of behaviors in certain spaces, into architectural research can help us determine how different spatial configurations encourage certain behaviors, and if these behaviors are positive or negative. It helps us research the effect of architecture in the social dynamics of a place.

A negative example of architecture being used in another way than the architect predicted, was the Pruitt-Igoe social housing complex in St. Louis, Missouri [Fig. 7]. A modernist utopia that ended up being a complete failure for not taking into account the users. The project was intended to solve poverty and urban decay in the area, but after the building was completed, the corridors, galleries and stairs that were originally destined to be safe community spaces, became hotspots for crime and gang-related activities. The complex ended up being demolished in 1973 for its negative impact and decay.

Fig. 7. Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, Missouri



THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN ARCHITECT AND USER

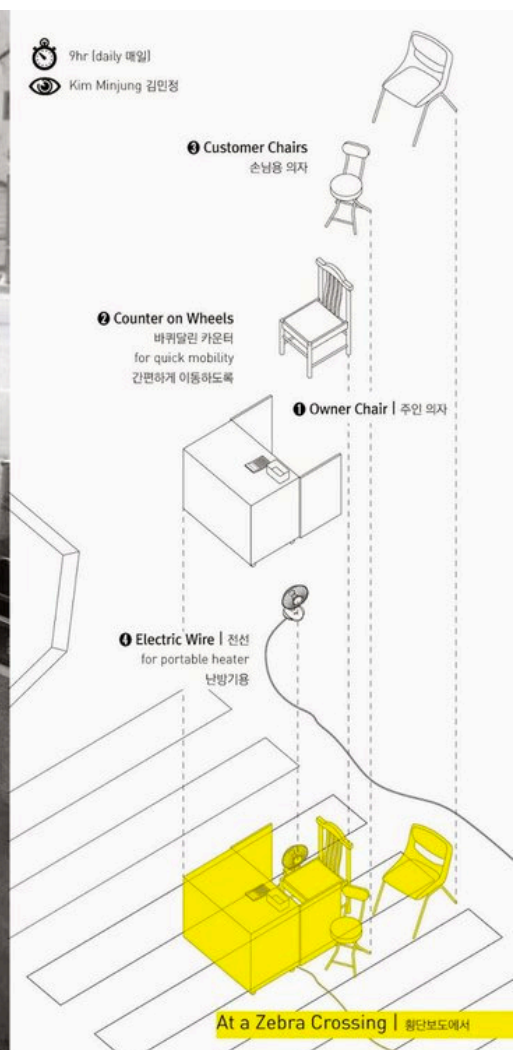
The Italian architect Giancarlo De Carlo discussed that architects were positioned outside of society as a result of power relations, and that they should engage with the public in the design and building process, overcoming the dichotomy between building and users. New forms of architectural production have emerged in the recent years, such as the concept of commons or common space, which is constantly redefined and shaped through collective action. The architect as a facilitator engages the public to carry out a project, turning architecture into a participatory process. When establishing a participatory relationship between the architect and the public, the study of proxemics becomes relevant as a way of understanding the relationship between the public and space, and the use of drawings or other inscriptive practices can serve as a communicative tool between the architect and the public.

THE CREATIVE USER

Hill describes the creative user as “a user that creates a new space or gives an existing one new meanings and uses, contrary to the ones predicted by the architect”. [Fig. 8] Allowing users to be creative puts them in an equal position to the architect in the role of the formulation of architecture. The architect is no longer superior to the user.

We can say that architecture is not merely a building, it is the relationship between an object and its occupants. Both the architect and the user can produce architecture, the architect by design and the user by use. Both are correlated, they are mutual dependencies, and one is not superior to the other. As Jonathan Hill discusses in *Occupying Architecture*, the user is often considered a stable, centralized and passive subject in the architectural profession, if the user is considered at all. Architects tend to think of a building as an art object that should be contemplated, instead of the building as an object that will be occupied and used. Hill states “Architecture is, it appears, demeaned by its association with habit and the presence of the user is perceived as a direct threat to the authority of the architect”.

Fig. 8. Excerpt from the book Borrowed City: Motoelastic. The image displays an example of a creative user appropriating the built environment, in Seoul (South Korea)



APPROPRIATION, TIME AND THE UNFINISHED

In *Architecture Depends*, Jeremy Till discusses the importance of taking into consideration time. He states that architecture is subjected not only to the elemental forces of time, but also the social forces of time, which are the change of users and functions over time, and then he continues with the striking statement that “the architect only starts what time and other continue”. What is the role of the architect when intervening on a site? Should the architect design for the future as well? The design process is never finished, it continues “long after the architect has left the scene”. Instead of seeing buildings as a finished, completed product, Till says that the priority of the architect should shift towards building the unfinished, in the sense that it allows for the possibility of appropriation by its users. [Fig. 9,10]

The way the users will behave is unpredictable, human behaviour is too complex for architects to predict how people will behave in the buildings they design. This unpredictability should be taken into account when designing a building, aiming for the unfinished, letting the user take part in the architectural process through appropriation, and allowing the building to absorb future uses or changing conditions. In Till's words, “it is about the making of space, but also about leaving space for interpretation (...) Building the unfinished compels the architect to project multiple actions onto the building. Where the functionalist or behaviorist architect attempts to determine use in a fixed and singular manner, the architect of the unfinished mentally inhabits the spaces of their future building in myriad ways in order to test them for their openness to appropriation, and then makes adjustments when the whole feels too constricted. The important thing is that it is conceptually unfinished in order to allow time to take its inevitable course in a positive manner.”

Fig. 9.10. 019 Artist collective in Ghent, Brussels.

The project was designed as an unplanned, accumulative, step-by-step way of creating architecture, in a way that the building work continues, responding to chance occurrences and unexpected opportunities and possibilities, and adds to a story that will never be complete.



DRAWING IN ARCHITECTURE

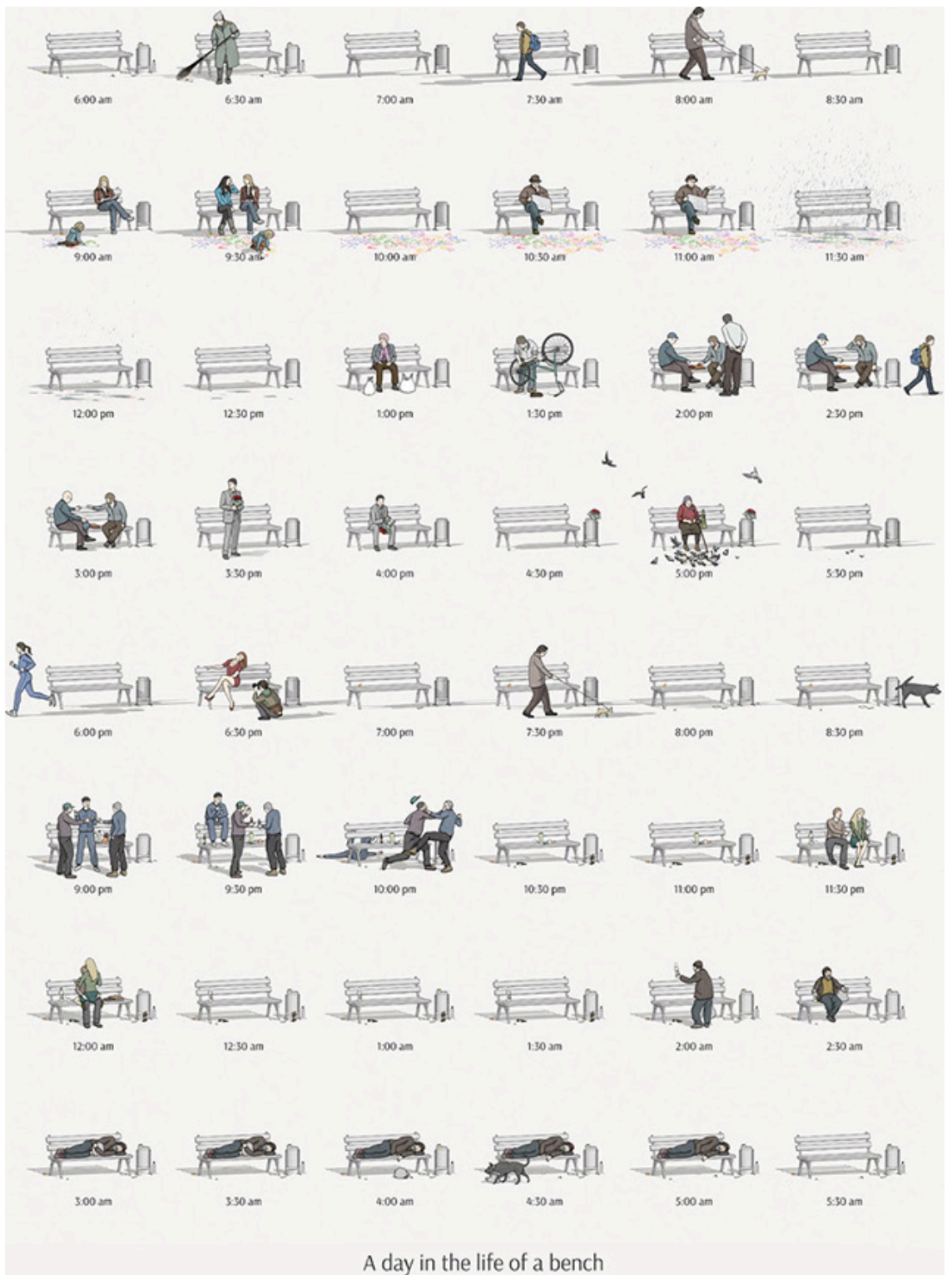
Uses, challenges and potential

Drawing in architecture can have many roles and functions, it can be a research tool to collect and analyze findings, to translate these findings into a design; it can be a communicative tool during the design process, or it can also serve as a communicative tool between the architect and the general public. This chapter will go over the different roles of drawing in the profession of architecture, from research to design, exposing its challenges and limitations.

Often the architectural process begins with a drawing, the initial sketch, and then continues with a series of architectural drawings, which are abstract and reductive, usually ignoring use and time. They represent an idea, but this idea is not the real building itself, it is merely an abstraction that is detached from its social and temporal context. The time factor is always missing in architectural representation. How can a drawing represent time? [Fig. 11]

Incorporating narrative into the architectural process has the potential to capture the experience of spaces, the lives of the people who live in or use a building, stories that have happened within, traces of memory, meanings, experiences and human interactions with the built environment. A graphic narrative or visual storytelling includes the time factor, and has the potential to bring the architectural process closer to the general public, while also becoming a tool for architectural production.

Fig. 11. "A Day in the Life of a Bench" by Max Degtyarev. A webcomic that illustrates different interactions of people with a specific bench throughout the day.



A day in the life of a bench

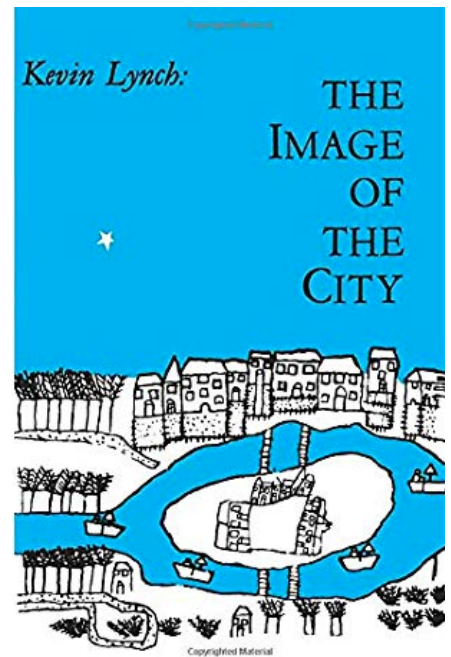
INSCRIPTIVE PRACTICES

As a research tool

Prior to the site visit, qualitative data and a series of maps, site plans and drawings were provided to us, which served as a base for the findings on site to be added. One of the advantages of using inscriptive practices as an analytical tool is that it can express many layers of information at the same time, but it also presents challenges such as the extent of legibility of the graphic content and the degree of competence of the readers. Lucas uses the term of inscriptive practice, which not only include drawings, but also notations, diagrams, maps, and any other type of graphic work. A drawing makes sense as a tool to translate proxemic studies, when it presents different layers of information, not only showing spatial qualities but also including notations, movement, or any type of observation made during fieldwork research. Therefore, a one-dimensional, purely spatial analysis fails to account for interpersonal and social relations, as well as the meaning spaces have for its users.

As architects, one of our main ways of communicating ideas is through drawings; we are used to represent spaces visually. According to Berger, a drawing is a “record of one’s discovery of an event – seen, remembered, or imagined” , which makes it a useful, informative research method, particularly in fieldwork. It is a tool to represent the experience of space in a visual format. Since proxemics involve the study of space, inscriptive practices can adequately represent space and any forms of social behavior or interactions in it.

Fig. 12. Cover of *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch



A relevant example of the use of graphic content to represent the experience of space are the works of Kevin Lynch in *Image of the City*, published in 1960. In the book [Fig. 12], Lynch discusses the concept of environmental image, defined as the generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by an individual, and uses a series of mental maps to represent spatial settings and human action simultaneously [Fig. 13]. Lynch sees spaces as not merely a physical entity, but also as mental images, or a subjective experience. This idea of space relates to Henri Lefebvre's theory of social space, that space is a social product, or a complex social construction, and it embodies social relationships. In *The Production of Space*, published in 1974, Lefebvre questions the use of maps to decode all meanings and contents of a space, and argues that there is no finite amount of maps that could represent all the meanings of a space. However, a drawing with several layers of information can get close to decoding, or representing, all the information from the research.

Fig. 13. An example of a mind map in *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch

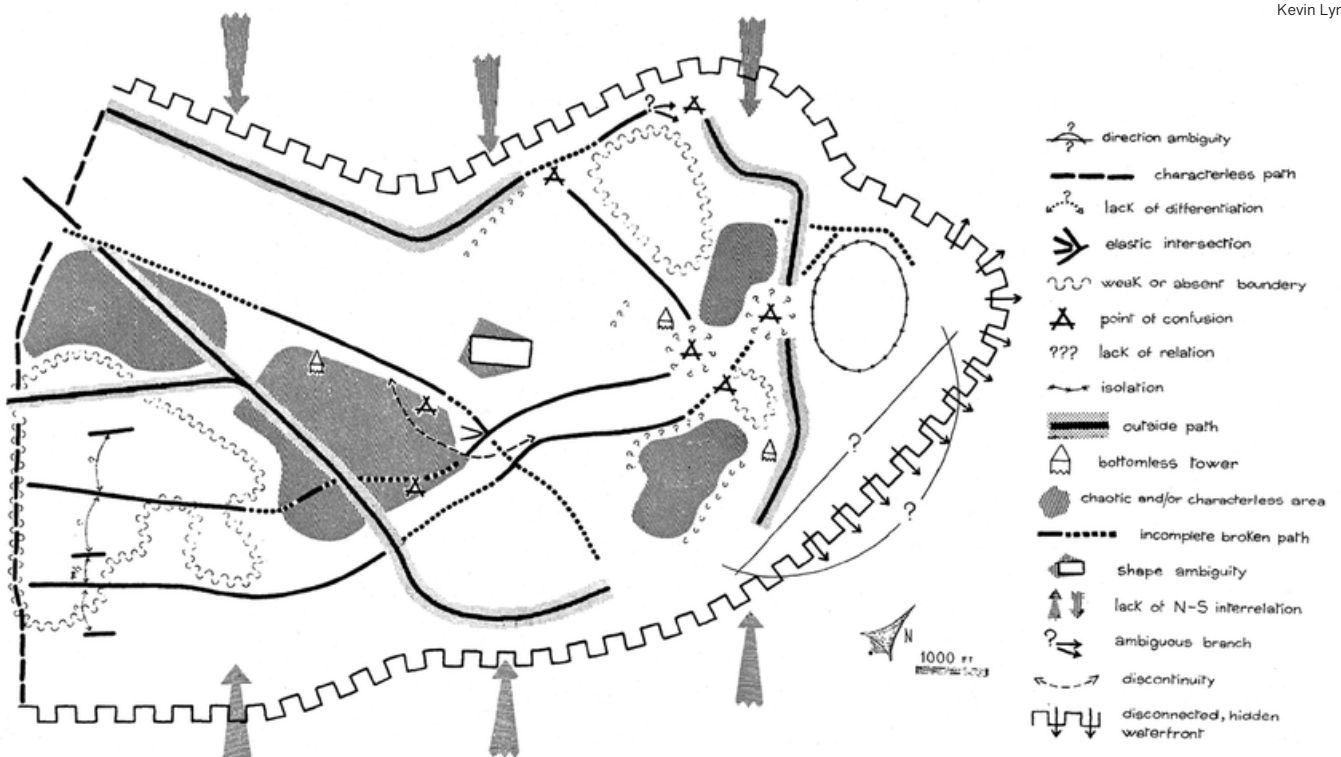


Fig. 14,15. Kotti by Larissa Fassler

An example I find quite intriguing and successful are the series of drawings Kotti 2008, 2010, 2014 by the artist Larissa Fassler, in which she represents her observations on the Kottbusser Tor in Berlin [Fig. 14, 15], recording a diverse range of interactions, moments, and elements she has observed over time.

In a similar way, the works of Atelier Bow-Wow study how people occupy space and the social relationships that are created through space. They use drawing as a form of research, to translate their observations at different scales. For them, “being able to distinguish each detail in an illustration is evidence that people have seen them”. They meticulously draw the spatial qualities as well as the way people use buildings and interact with the environment, using illustration as a form of architectural ethnography. [Fig. 16, 17]

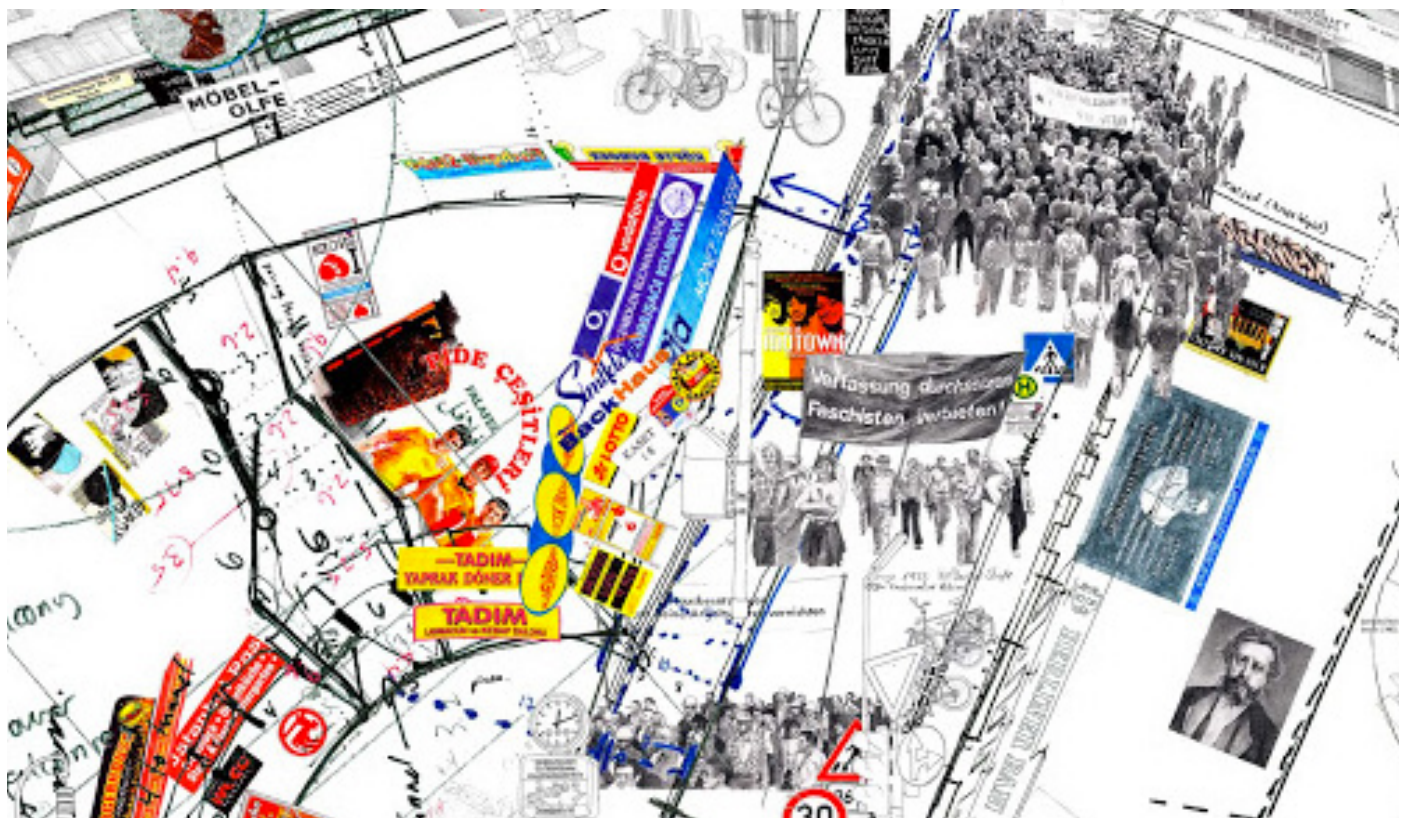


Fig. 16. Kitamoto Station Plaza
by Atelier Bow-Wow

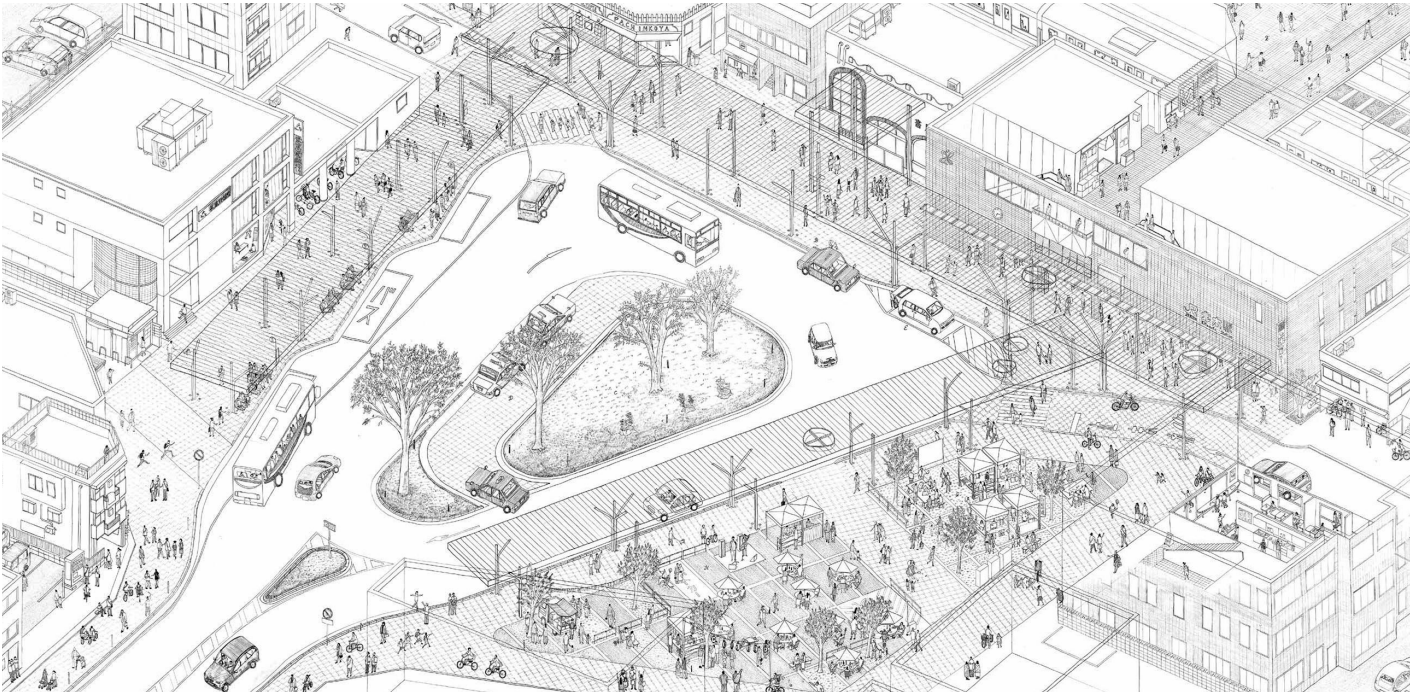
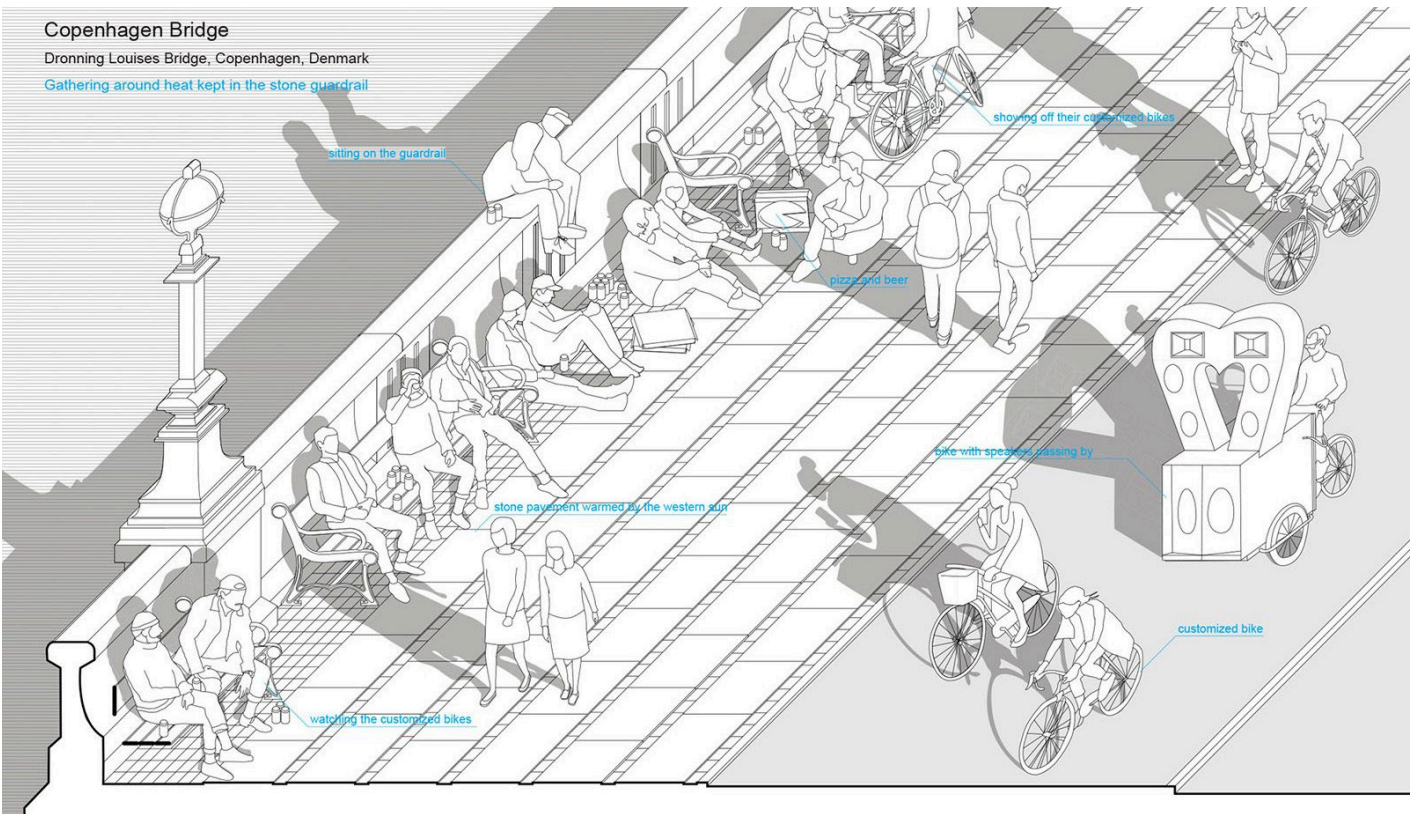


Fig. 17. Dronning Louises Bridge
by Atelier Bow-Wow



INSCRIPTIVE PRACTICES

As a communicative tool between the architect and the user

We have seen how inscriptive practices have the ability to represent several layers of information observed over time, such as occupation, human interactions, experiences and spatial qualities, as well as to translate research into visual way, which can be later used as a starting point for a design proposal.

But how can drawings be communicative of the architectural process towards the user? Drawings can be used in participatory processes, in which the expert architect sets the terms of reference for the participatory engagement, in which the negotiated solution ends up being framed by the architect's knowledge system and specialised modes of communication, putting the architect in a position of power over the inexperienced user. A participatory process should consider the priorities of the user over the will of the client or the architect.

One of the main weaknesses of architectural representation is the detachment from the social and temporal context. Till states that "something conceived out of time cannot survive in time". Therefore, time should be introduced in all phases of architectural representation and production. As Till discusses, one representational method alone cannot represent the complexity of time, but combining, for example, drawings together with a narrative, allows the participants to project occupation into the spatial frame.

Drawings can have a participatory role when they are not remote abstractions of forms and spaces. When they project occupation, and start telling a story [Fig. 18], they can become a place for an exchange of ideas, suggestive of different possibilities and aspirations in the architectural process.

In the context of participation, traditional architectural representational methods can become a problem, since the non expert user is not trained to understand or read these drawings. To make sure the user can actively participate, new modes of communication have to be established.

Conversations can describe the temporal, contingent social occupation of space, something that is neglected in the reductive, traditional architectural modes of representation [Fig. 19]. Till proposes the equitable conversational mode that is found in storytelling, as a way of creating an equal relationship between the expert architect and the non-expert user.

Fig. 18. Increasing Disorder In A Dining Table, by architects Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till, which documents the progression of a meal from a perfectly laid table, through a motion-trace palimpsest of the dinner party in action, to the wreckage of dirty dishes and crumpled napkins after the dinner is over.

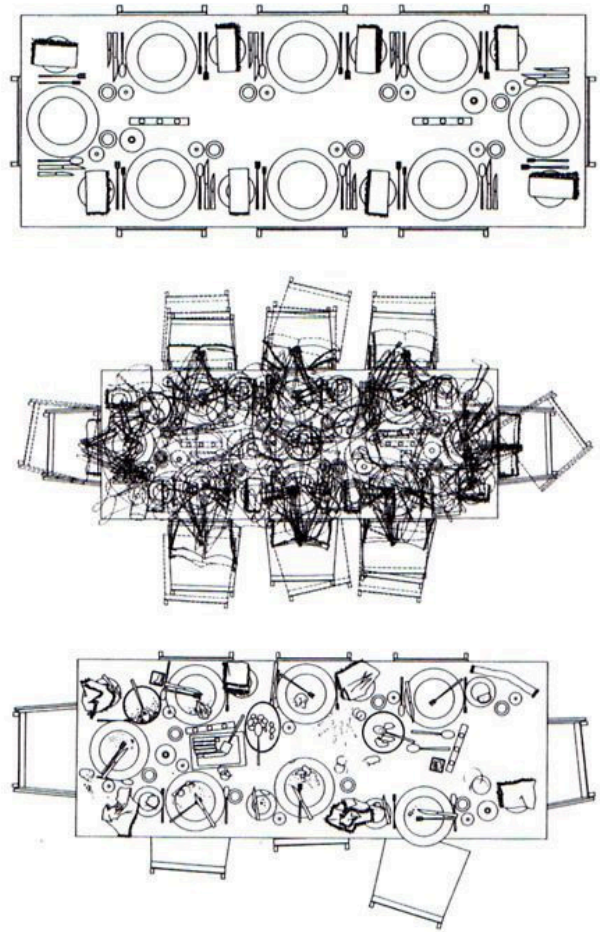
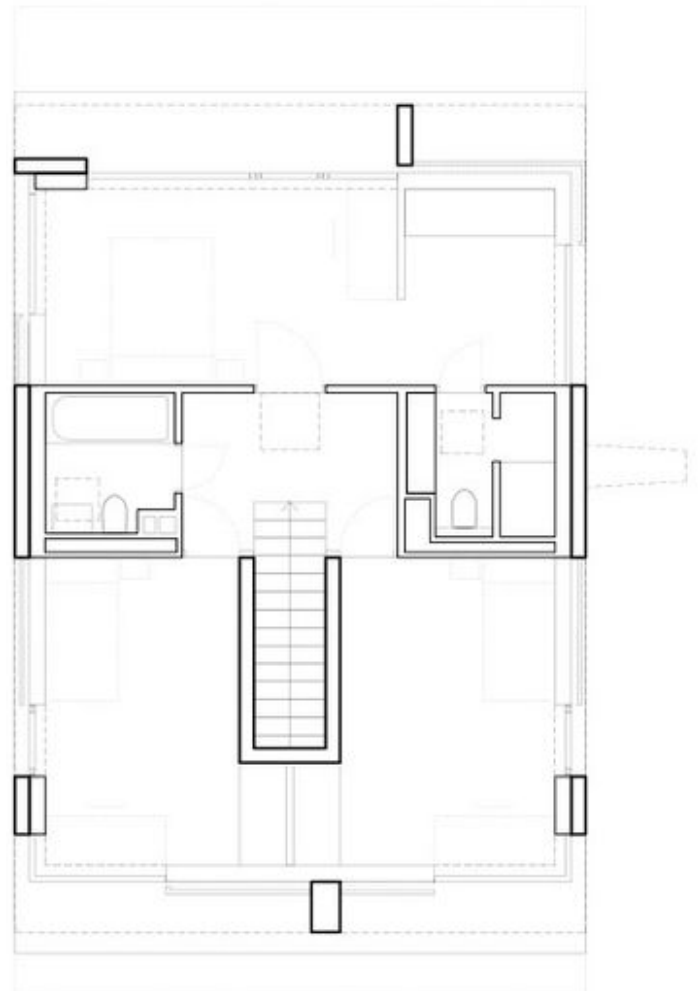


Fig. 19. An example of a reductive architectural drawing. Floor plan of Villa Sandmeier by Lacroix Chessex .



THE ACT OF STORYTELLING

User, time and space

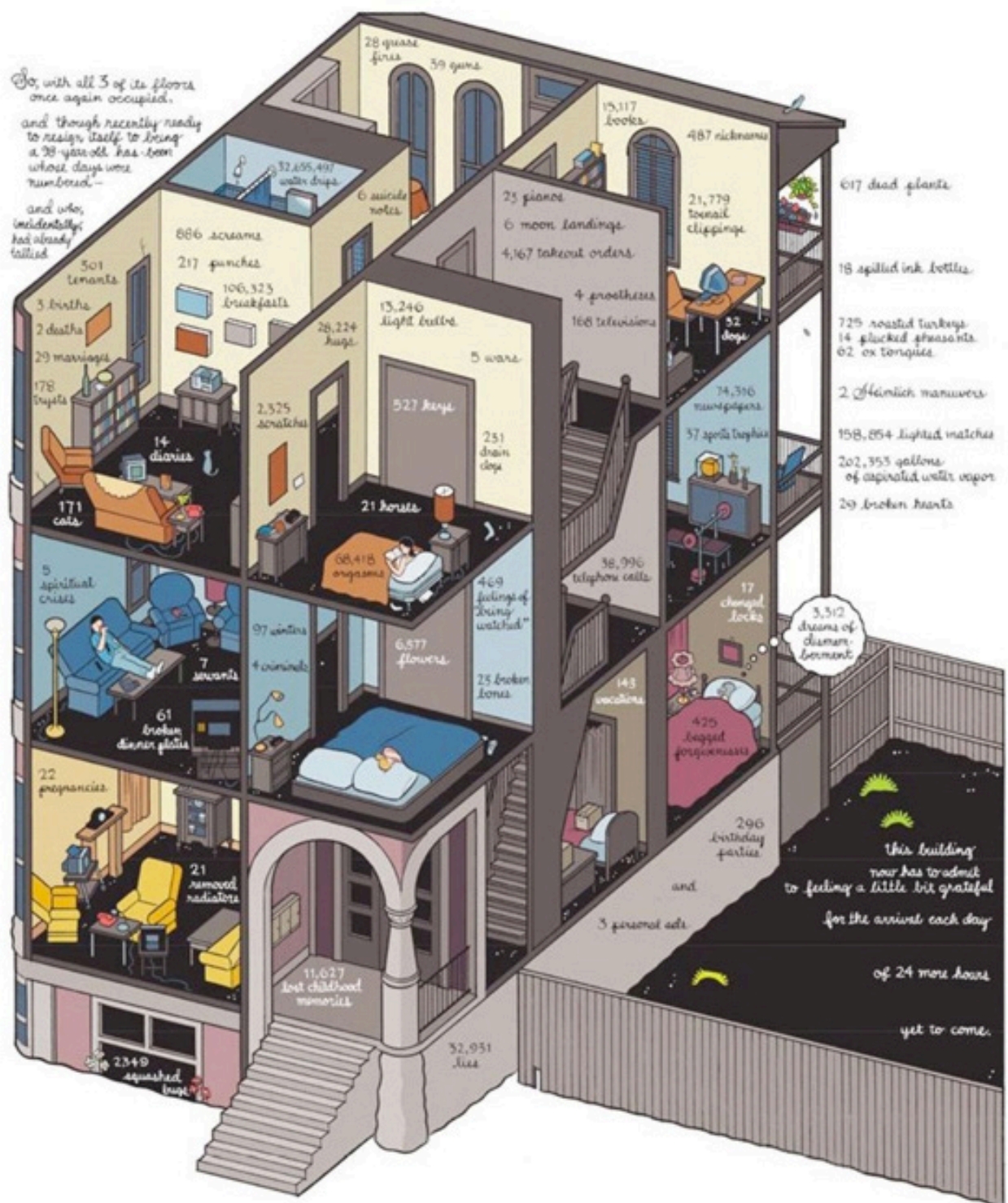
Graphic narratives include the factor of time, unlike the standard architectural drawings, which have the function of describing the physical qualities of the building, such as size, materiality and spatial configuration. Visual storytelling can both represent architecture and the human activities that happen within, all the stories, memories and meanings that the users give to spaces. An example of visual storytelling that depicts architecture in a quite analytical way is *Building Stories* by the American cartoonist Chris Ware [Fig. 20], in which he tells the story of the inhabitants of a building in Chicago, depicting memories or certain moments in time, shifting between past, present and future. The combination of overlapped memories, stories, moments and numerical information in the form of infographs becomes a unique take on the depiction of a building and its users.

Of all the modes of communication that could be used in architectural production, that of storytelling is potentially the most productive. Stories can be descriptive of the past and be based on reality, but can also be fictional, depicting future scenarios. Stories allow for imagination and multiple interpretations of what is being told, and they have the potential to erase the barrier between the expert architect and the non expert user. As Kristin Ross writes, the act of storytelling is “an act that presumes in its interlocutor an equality of intelligence rather than an inequality of knowledge, posits equality, just as the act of explication posits inequality”. Architects often feel the need to explain how their buildings should be used, from an authoritative position, especially when it comes to public buildings. However, using stories one can be more suggestive, less authoritative, letting the user imagine and interpret different ways of occupying and using spaces.

Storytelling can be, other than a communicative tool, a tool for architectural production. Stories allow to strat the architectural process, with a “what if?”, projecting different possibilities in the forms of stories. The role of the architect as a storyteller becomes “to understand and draw out the spatial implications of the urban storytelling”. Storytelling requires extensive knowledge of the building, urban block or neighbourhood in question, (and all the stories within), as well as imagination, to be able to project different possibilities.

Stories can spark conversations and become a place for the exchange of ideas, information and inspiration open to all participants in the architectural process, including the users.

Fig. 19. Illustration from Building Stories by Chris Ware



Similar to Chris Ware's *Building Stories*, another American illustrator, Richard McGuire, pursues a similar aim in his graphic novel *Here*, where he depicts the corner of a living room over time, shifting from past, present and future, displaying different moments of time simultaneously, in different time windows that give an overview of all the memories, anecdotes, and future scenarios that have happened or could happen in the same living room. [Fig. 20, 21] Playing with time, McGuire manages to narrate the story of the room in a non-linear way, though creating links in the different time windows that connect different elements or parts of the story. He challenges the traditional, linear narrative, by making the reader create or construct the narrative by connecting the different time windows. By doing this, the reader becomes an active participant in the creation of the narrative.

Both *Building Stories* and *Here* are examples of different ways of communicating architecture, incorporating the factor of time. A graphic narrative allows for the combination of more traditional architectural representation methods, such as axonometric views or one point perspectives, with stories. It can describe architecture while also narrating a story, incorporating memories, future possibilities, meanings, images, occupation...and most importantly time, turning the static view of architecture as an object to the variability, and unpredictability of the relationship between humans and space.

Fig. 20.21. Illustrations from Here by Richard McGuire



THE STORY OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD

A graphic narrative

INTRODUCTION

This book aims to tell the untold story of an urban block in Anderlecht (Brussels), comprised between Rue Previnaire, Rue des Goujons, Rue des Bassins and Rue Emile Carpentier. Using non linear narrative, the story will be told intertwining past, present and future, displaying scenes from different time frames simultaneously, creating unexpected links.

Architecture is a practice that is equally spatial and social, the use cannot be fully predicted or imposed by the architect. To what extent is the architect the author of an architectural project, when users have appropriated the spaces and changed its uses and meanings? The act of storytelling in architecture has the potential of communicating the process of architectural production to the public, blurring boundaries between the expert architect and the nonexpert user, putting both in an equal position and leaving space for interpretation from the public on how buildings should be used.

This book is meant to be a work in progress throughout the length of the graduation project, mixing reality and fiction, with the aim of both documenting how the site has evolved through time and also projecting possible future scenarios, suggesting different directions that the evolution of the site could take in the future.

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...

2020



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.

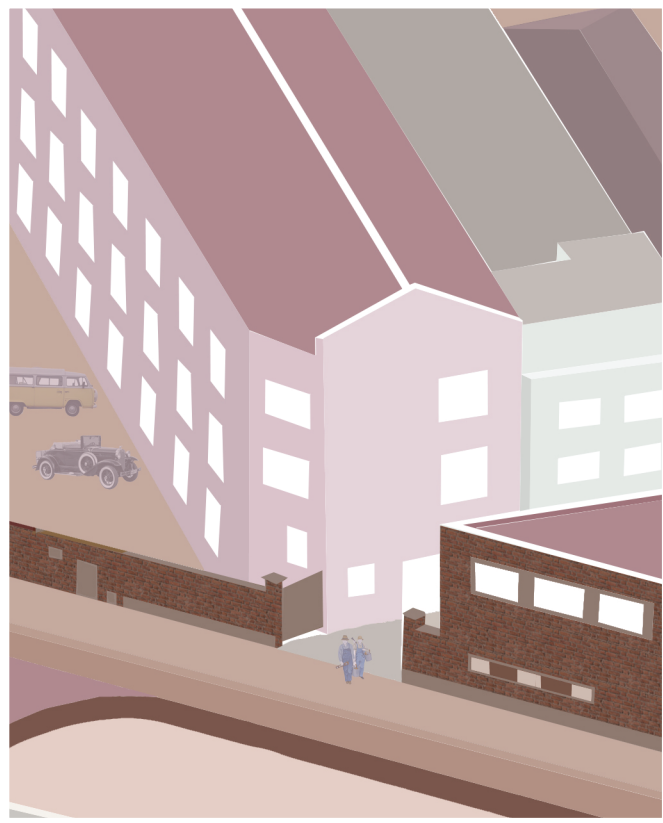
2020



2025



1951



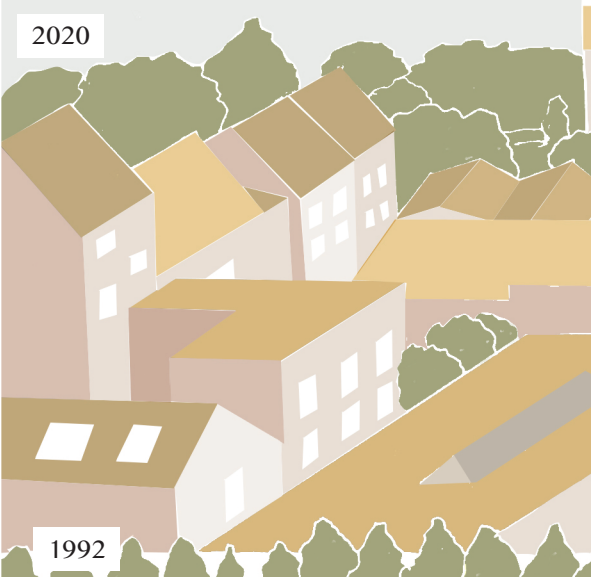
1992- The construction of the new Leonidas chocolate factory begins

In 1992 the Fromagerie Bel was demolished to give place to the Leonidas factory. The new construction started before the demolition of the former industrial complex was complete.

1930 - The Senne

The river Senne used to pass through the site, surrounded by a large number of industrial buildings and activities. It was later covered, but its shape defined the shape of Les Goujons social housing block.

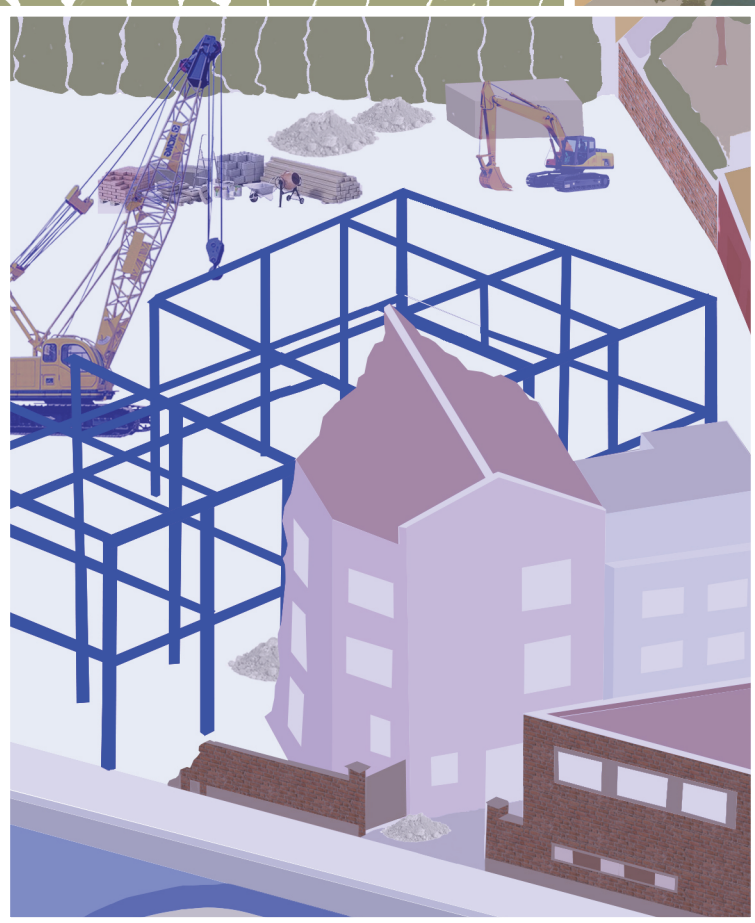
2020



1930



1992



2027 - A renovated facade for Les Goujons

The replacement of the existing balconies, which are in a poor state currently, is predicted to be finished before 2027, which will give Les Goujons a more modern, attractive appearance, providing a new layer of exterior spaces for new uses.

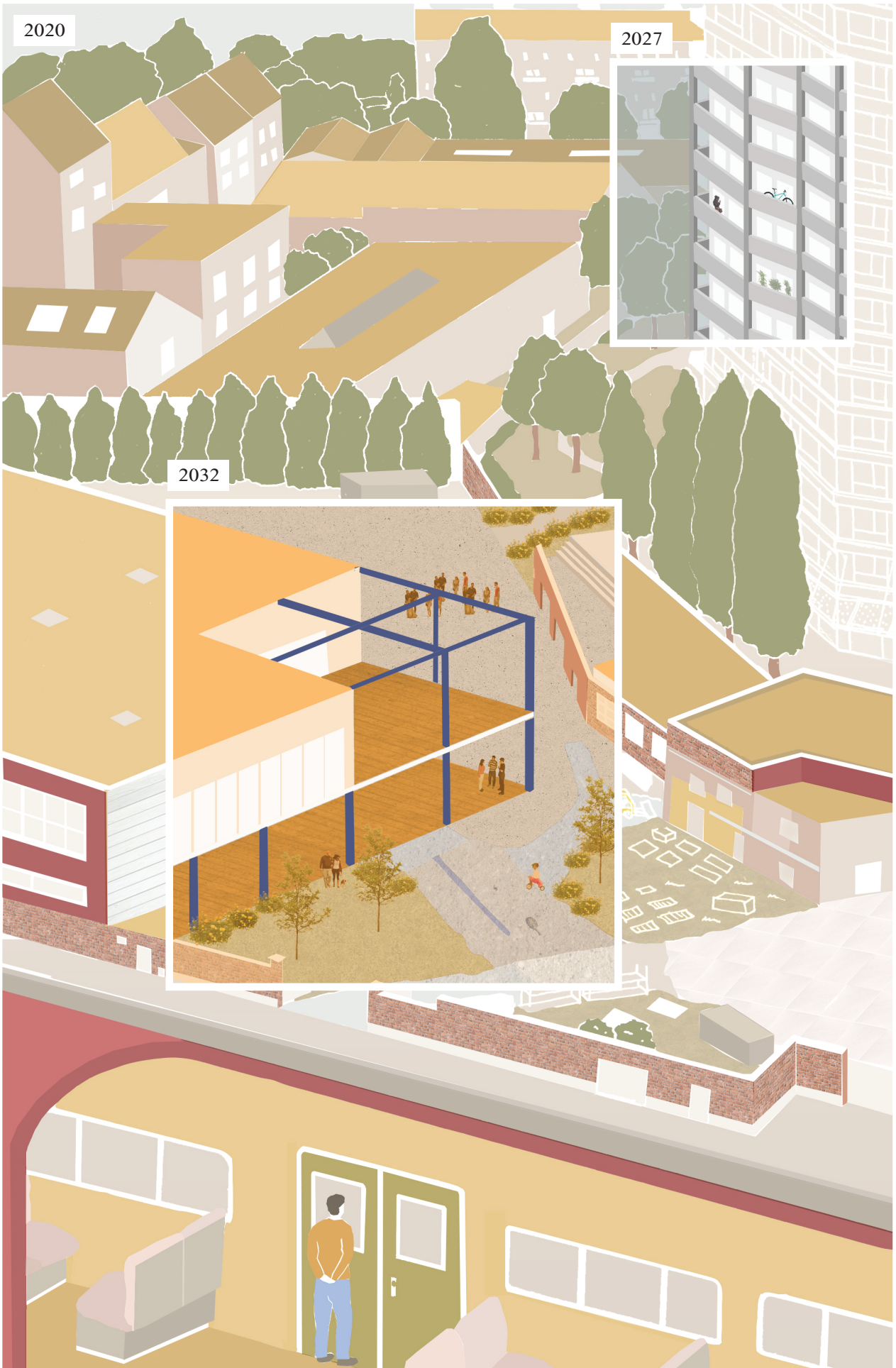
2032- The former Leonidas factory is transformed

The building could be transformed, opened up and potentially turned into a civic center, which would serve the community and the whole neighborhood. The transformation of the surroundings into active public spaces would contribute to the development of the site towards a safe, active and visible part of the city.

2020

2027

2032



To be continued