

The fourth wall of the stage
Walking the line between stage and backstage

Reflection

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As the urban architecture studio we participated in investigating an industrial fabric sidelined from the city of Maastricht. The studio allows you to form your own lens to look at the urban tissue, and for this term follows a collective theme: gleaning, which can be understood as the act of collecting leftover crops from fields that have been harvested. It can also be inferred as finding new value in something that is left behind. This is where the essence of the studio comes across, where everyone participating found their own meaning and definition of the term that they apply to their respective projects. Our area of interest, i.e. the sappi industrial zone offers a mix of different architectural vocabularies that co-exist with a wide gradient of used and unused, which makes the application of gleaning and seeking new value an interesting challenge.

The first step towards showcasing the city through various concepts including Overhead underneath and inbetween, Squatters and monasteries, the city and the factory, and other urban renewal aspects, sparked my interest towards the thresholds and border conditions within and around the industrial island. My foregoing urban investigations followed this track of thought. Through urban design, we explored the idea of image and identity and ways to stitch the urban redevelopments of sappi to the rest of the city. By creating a void, we instigated the development of 2 nodes around the thresholds, that results in a stitch between the 2 distinct parts through a void of public activity that stages and celebrates the performance of the city through participation of different characters around the area.

My initial research ideas revolved across intangible aspects of gleaning, and the silent dialogue between the buildings. In essence, How do buildings glean from each other? This narration incorporated phenomenological aspects and made me understand the inter-relations between different buildings, and the intangible dialogue shared between them. Paired with the ideas for our urban investigations, this approach aided me in investigating configurations of such a performance and unveiled the aspects that instigate these dialogue. Though the idea was short lived and needed further developments, I realized that my interest is shifting towards the performative aspects and looking at the city through the frame of

theatrum mundi or the city as a stage. My personal inclination towards set designs and theatricality pushed me towards looking at the urban node through a similar framework for the architectural design as well.

The selected node is anchored between the Lanbouwbelang, the white building and the dwellings sandwiched inbetween the Bassin and the river Maas. This node that supports the void is structured through around characters that have distinct lineages. One key character that is in a state of Limbo at this node is Landbouwbelang. Partly empty and partly squatted, Landbouwbelang offers various functions that are related to the work of artists, performers and professionals who are trying to generate cultural magnetism through their work. But filtered through multiple obstacles and the new proposals for demolishing the buildings neglects the subliminal role such programmes have within the city and this graduation project challenges the vision of the tender through a balance approach by expanding such places of cultural production while retaining and reshaping the identity of the site. The research addresses similar topics and tries to unveil them. Performance in its nature is temporary and is focused on the body, meaning it is mobile and does not always leave a trace. In theory, then, everywhere could be an infrastructure for performance, but beyond the stage what else in the city enables performance to be made, and by whom?



Fig 1:
Landbouwbelang and
the clay factory
along the Maas.

Once acquainted to the squatted infrastructure of Landbouwbelang, , I began to understand and wonder about such backstage cultural support systems and the invisible anchors to cultural consumption and activities. If cultural consumption is what happens onstage, then what are the backstages, places where culture is produced, rehearsed, practiced and experimented? The research investigates one such urban backstage(landbouwbelang), places that are often unnoticed in which culture is produced before it meets the public eye. Many a time, the focus of architectural developments is always towards the consumption of culture and its relevance within the



Fig 2: Domesticated artist space at Landbouwbelang.

urban fabric but the support systems or backstages are not given enough importance. The research tries to understand how one such backstage works and provides a case study for possibilities and potentials of activities and the domestication of existing infrastructure by artists and makers who cannot afford or do not gain commercial presence. Landbouwbelang works as the perfect candidate as it brings together different dynamics of cultural production within a distinct industrial urban landscape that is hidden behind shutters. The research tries to validate the kinetic nature of design for production and assesses the co-existence of stage and backstage and their interdependent nature. It unveils the curtain or wall between them and stages the backstage.

Looking into landbouwbelang, I understood the prevalent value of gleaning within its appropriation. In rather, humble steps Landbouwbelang and its current uses showcase great diversity in ways to domesticate existing infrastructure. They give new value and meaning to the existing building and have been successful in modulating it to their own uses. Not only this, different reuse ideas can be seen across the building where different things have been given new connotations. For instance, articles like doors and windows are gleaned from across the city and reused as partitions or to frame spaces within the open concrete grid. In a way, these smaller gleaning initiatives are props to the existing set of landbouwbelang. This layering of props, and its temporal aspect goes back to my initial thoughts on the intangible aspects of gleaning. In a way, this is the performance



Fig 3: Reference frame for the research methodology showcasing the artist studios.

of gleaning. Its shifting age and layering value through time.

The research reveals the material, immaterial, spatial and ecological conditions of such workspaces that aid in cultural production. The study of landbouwbelang as a backstage displays its uniqueness as a case study and by use architectural drawings these leanings further validates the design approach towards domestication of existing infrastructure towards appropriability for a production environment. Additionally, it showcases cultural production as a new kind of performance, that in the design is further staged. Inspired by the set designs of the movie dogville(2013), the methodology removes the curtains and reveals the working and organism-istic nature of cultural production. Domestication and appropriation is not a static phenomenon. Hence, the methodology needed to be something that explains the mutating phenomenon. Inspired from the sets of the movie, the activities within landbouwbelang are showcase through set of stop-motions that unveils the performance that is hidden within the brick walls. It reveals the activities of mainly 3 distinct spaces i.e. Artist studio: the quarter of makers, Hall:the quarter of performance, and Corner rooms:the quarter of living spaces. Landbouwbelang is a labyrinth and one loses the idea of space, and orientation within it, hence the final product will showcase the labyrinthic nature of landbouwbelang, this learning is transferred into the design, through fixed directional markers that align with the spine of the functions. By allowing the domesticity into the production space, it was suggested, there is a greater possibility for a fluid relationship between individual and group practice, unlike the formalized spatial and temporal structure of the rehearsal which brings individual practitioners together at a set time and for a specific purpose.

The future of the building is in tricky situation with high monetary and capitalistic investments that are hindering any process of redevelopment, and in this process the hidden cultural landmark loses its history and identity. The future of the cultural freezone is uncertain, and from the perspective of artists and young professional of Maastricht, it is imperative to have a program like this, that not only houses the a place of production but becomes a platform for people to engage

with the backstage. Through designing for attention, stability and for the unintended it tries to remove the wall between the stage and backstage to re-establish importance of backstage to cultural activity.

There is perhaps an argument for a new model of combined production and display space for performance with lease-based rather than timed access, within which individual artists can build up their practice with access to the physical transmission of ideas from other performers, the development of personal archives, and the building up of a local audience over time. Rather than attempting to shape the specific functions that units of urban space have and the type of cultural activity that should fill them, an infrastructural approach has the opportunity to create favorable conditions for a wide range of productive activities without needing to envision exactly what form those activities might take.

The design navigates itself through a web of complicated layers. With early issues of accessibility to the squatted facility and the complexities of the future of the area and building with the tender sets a big monetary and capitalistic spotlight on the site. The social value of the place and program, and the public opinion on the building and squatters requires a shift in image of the place. And that shift in image needs to take into account the layering and importance of the current image of the building. The project tries to bring value to both the engaging public and the unintended through drafting thresholds that forces engagement and tries to bring together different aspects of performance and practice. Not just highlighting the consumption aspect, but rather making the process a new form of performance for the stage. It can be seen and heard from angles that the stage cannot offer and introduces a mix of purposive and accidental audience, it recombines with other aesthetic phenomena in unplanned ways and is often received differently from its intention. Through these measure it tries to bring spot light to an existing building that might become a memory in the future.

