

P4 Reflection

ARTISANAT | FABRIEK
A centre for craft and education in Anderlecht

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Urban Architecture
MSc4 Spolia

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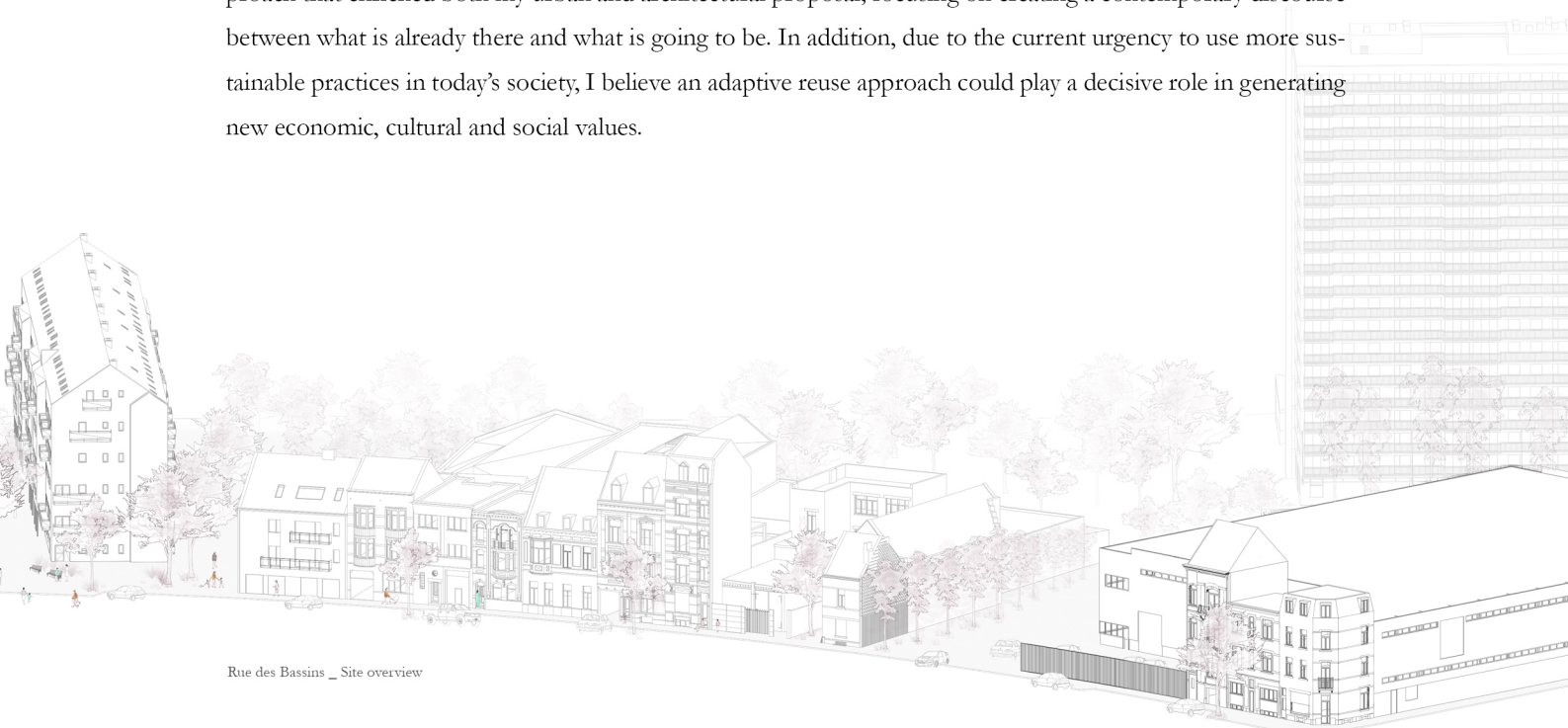
INTRODUCTION

This paper is a reflection on the process of my graduation project “Artisanat Fabriek, a centre for craft and education in Anderlecht”, from the initial research phase to the final design proposal. First, I will discuss the studio’s position and its approaches and I will then continue with a consideration on the relationship between the research and the resulting design proposal. I will critically look back at the methods chosen and the reasoning behind the urban and architectural decisions undertaken. Finally, a reflection will be made about the relevance of the research and the design proposal within a wider social context.

URBAN ARCHITECTURE - SPOLIA

The graduation studio “Spolia”, within the chair of Urban Architecture, interprets the theme of reuse, by looking into existing buildings and urban scenarios with a creative enthusiasm in the city of Brussels. “Spolia” is a term that comes from archaeology that has traditionally been defining the architectural leftovers as a phenomena of the past. Today, the concept is extended to contemporary architecture and discusses the relevance of making use of reclaimed parts in the current architectural discourse. Spolia are material and immaterial remains that carry with them not only ecological and economic motivations, but also historical and cultural values, when reused in a new structure. Investigation into the practice of reuse, as well as the understanding of spolia, leads to a fresh attitude towards the existing urban and architectural context. The studio values the use of spolia as a modern design tool that proposes a different way of dealing with the existing. This is seen as an opportunity to establish an innovative and more complex dialogue between “what to keep” and “what to build”.

In these terms, the theme of the graduation studio allowed me to experiment a playful approach towards all design and research phases. By acknowledging the importance of what is already there, I developed an approach that enriched both my urban and architectural proposal, focusing on creating a contemporary discourse between what is already there and what is going to be. In addition, due to the current urgency to use more sustainable practices in today’s society, I believe an adaptive reuse approach could play a decisive role in generating new economic, cultural and social values.



Rue des Bassins _ Site overview

RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

The multidisciplinary approach of the studio offered the opportunity to look at architecture also from the angle of anthropology, by integrating alternative methods to research and design. It encouraged us to discover the social science perspective, which I believe being extremely important as a tool for an architect. Because architecture shapes the human environment, it extends far beyond a formal or structural science into a more extensive social dimension. For this reason, this anthropological approach led me to study the architectural context together with the human behaviors that inhabit it and make it alive. The research was divided into two main phases, the first leading to p1 and the second leading to p2. I focused on reading the city through the lens of the relationship between architectural language and human appropriation in order to have a deeper understanding of the site. The ways in which the space is appropriated displays how people feel in that specific environment and gives the architect a direction for a conscious intervention.

To p1 / “A Study of Appropriation and Architectural Language”

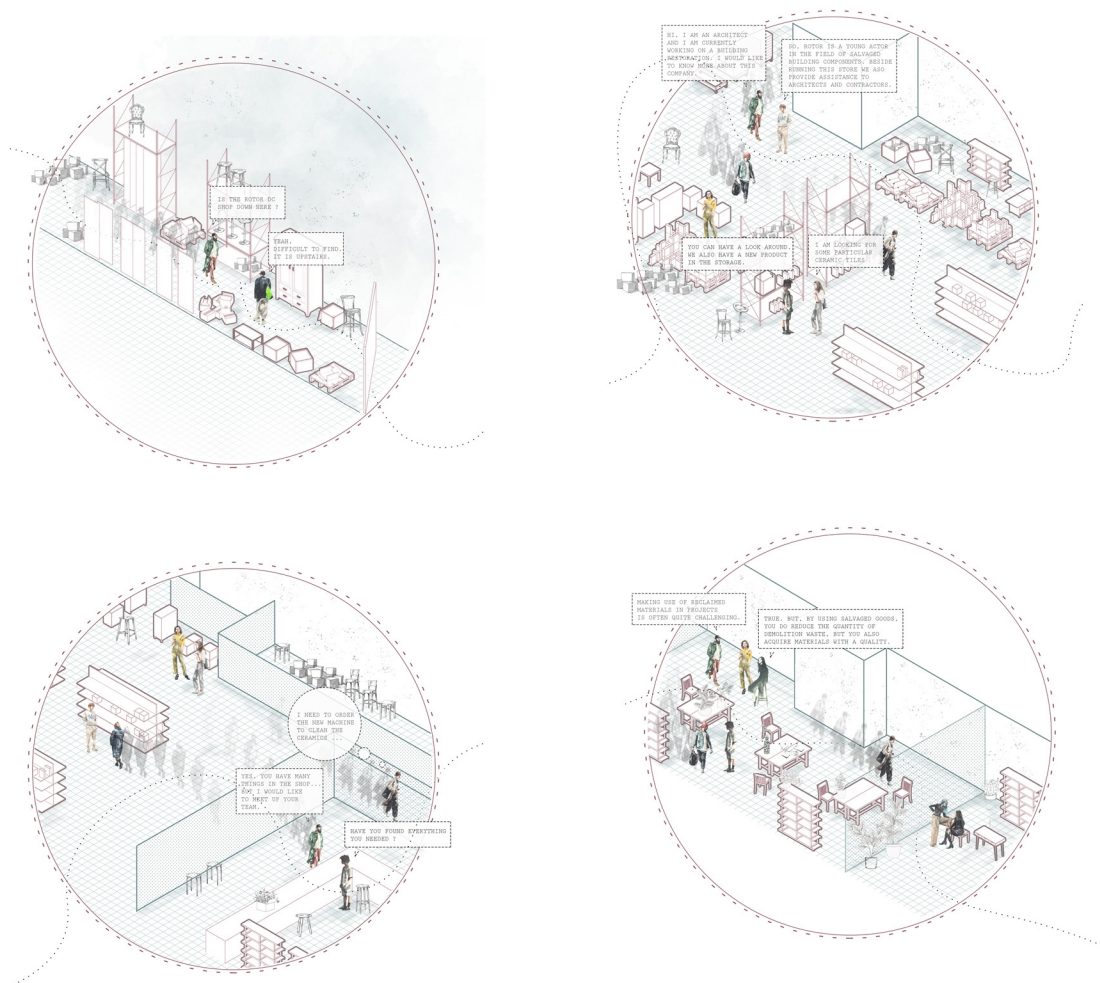
The first stage of the research was conducted in groups. Each group was assigned a topic that had a different focus on the Anderlecht site. This gave each of us a first observation of the area through the perspective of different themes that helped understanding the context we were going to intervene on. I worked together with Michelle Ho and Gabija Rutkunaite on “A study of appropriation and architectural language”. The research aimed to better understand the cultural tradition and the identity of the place by the use of personal and intuitive approaches. “Rue des bassins” (one of the streets that border the site project) was firstly analysed through a combination of different methods that helped us identifying a connection between the built environment and the way people interact with it. Then, we zoomed in one of the historical houses on the street. It emerged that appropriation and architectural language are tightly connected with each other, because the latter usually emerges from the physical environment, the same as the architectural language is affected by people habits. By the use of both visual analysis and simulation research, we concluded that the different processes of appropriation were tightly influenced by three main factors: the architectural typology, the ownership and the usership.



P1 research - in collaboration with Michelle Ho and Gabija Rutkunaite

To p2 / “Rotor stories”

The second stage of the research was conducted alone. I decided to continue my study on appropriation by focusing on the building that I was going to work on for my architectural proposal in order to contextualize my architectural choices. The Rotor building was analysed through the perspective of its different users by means of storytelling, so as to enhance aspects that could have not be addressed with standard research techniques. Because I genuinely believe that architecture is not only a matter of functionalism, but carries a greater complexity (the memory and the stories connected to it), I aspired to display the hidden and immaterial aspects of it. As architect, we tend to focus on the pure physical aspects of the built environment (programme, location, building mass, spatial setting and materiality), struggling to explain the non-physical or emotional qualities of the space. Instead of the conventional drawings used by architects (maps, floorplans, sections, elevations, etc.) the use of a graphic narrative helped me expressing some underestimated aspects of the building reality in a very accessible way. By means of the scenes, the characters guided the reader around the building, illustrating the different possible ways the building is used. The architectural structure assumed the form of a generic scene, where people and their actions of appropriation make the building alive.



P2 research - The Rotor building from the perspective of its users

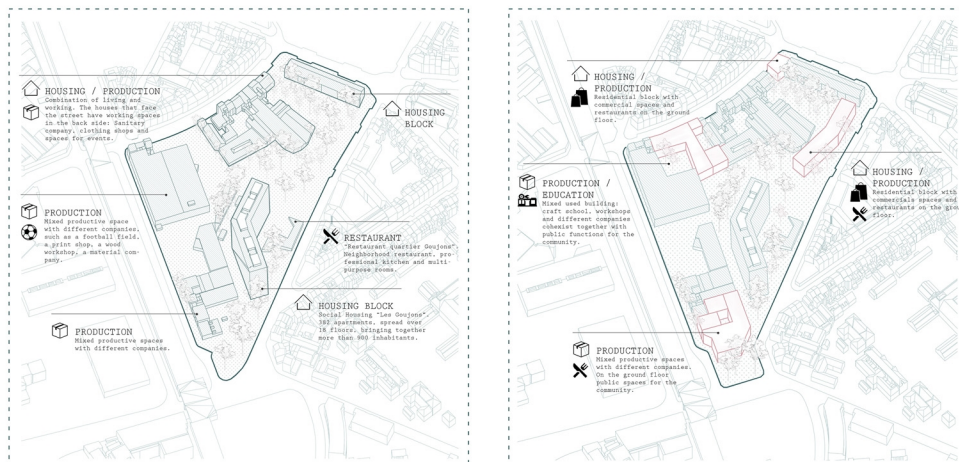
DESIGN WITH RELATION TO RESEARCH

The studio approached the design process into two main phases: the first leading to the urban proposal, and the second leading to the architectural proposal. Working with a medium-size plot (inaccessible for the regular tools of urbanism) gave us the possibility to fulfill the expectation through architecture. In these terms, design a building meant designing a complete environment.

To p2 / The urban context

As a result of several transformations, the given urban plot in Anderlecht is currently characterized by a variety of typologies (mainly industrial and residential) that coexists together but do not interact with the surroundings, leading to a deeply fragmented area. Although rooted inside the residential block, the production spaces neglect an openness to its context, causing alienation among the streets. During the research on appropriation, I understood that one of the biggest problems in the area was its alienation, that was caused by the problematic coexistence between productivity and residential areas. The poor quality and sterile environment created feelings of alienation amongst residents and users, that resulted in an area where people feel uncomfortable, where pride and sense of shared ownership of the environment is low.

As I approached the urban plan phase, I started questioning which is the role of urbanism in reshaping the community. In a society characterized by the disappearance of communities and the rise of individualism, I believe that urbanism could play a decisive role in bringing a sense of community back to our cities. I think that, through a proper spatial planning, the concept of neighbourhood could be reinvigorated and the interactions among inhabitants could be incredibly strengthened. All things considered, the urban proposal pursued a community-based approach that redeveloped the neighbourhood and diversified the economy, starting from the notions of productivity and creativity. As a consequence of a respectful attitude towards the existing, the urban proposal confronted the prevailing fragmentation by revitalizing an inner sequence of intimate public rooms that brought together a variety of new functions, promising a vibrant and variegated social realm to different groups of people. The public rooms or courtyards are a valuable vernacular feature of the Anderlecht area which is worth echoing: they bring a surprising experience of the city and reconnect the fragments through the creation of a dynamic community.



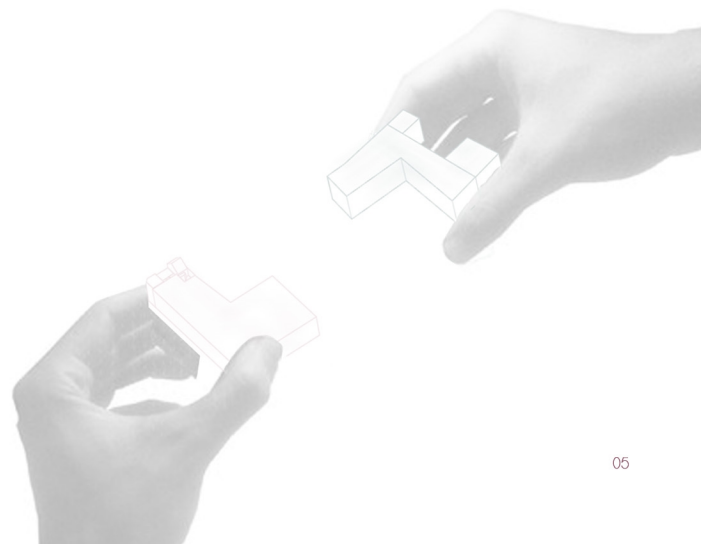
P2 urban plan - existing and proposal diagram

The realization of a multipurpose craft centre offered the possibility to rebuild the community through the restoration of the culture of making, by exhibiting and inaugurating it as a process towards innovation. In a current scenario where productive sides of cities are kept out of the city centres, the Artisanat Fabriek performs as an active element within the city of Brussels and engages truthfully with its social, historical and economic context. In other words, I aimed to build up the community around this institutional centre, that embodies openness and permeability, welcoming the community inside.

Because as stated by G. Schafer, “some of the most interesting conversation occur when there are opposing points of view”, the essence of the project has to be found in the constant dialogue among the old and the new. The adaptive reuse approach to the former Leonidas factory building does not only imply an interest in sustainability, but largely a search for a more complex architectural expression that brings past and future together in the architectural presence. I deeply believe that the architecture of the past has still an important place in our built environment. As L. Feiress stated, the present has to be located between the past and the future: as we cannot deny what has once happened in the past, we have to look forward to the future. In these terms, I maintained part of the existing building bringing to it new functions and originality in space’s experiences.

The original steel structure is maintained and becomes the centerpiece of the design. Carrying the values of the original construction into the new ensemble, it defines the internal space organization and encourages the addition configuration: the new building adapts and shapes around it. By mimicking its grid, the new wooden structure (in the addition) aims to establish an association with the steel into a combined system among the corridor that goes all around the inner courtyard. This transitional space is not only the circulation core, but also a cross point where old and the new connects.

In the inner courtyard the steel structure is celebrated as a mere spolia that stages what once was and what it could still be. The old and the new differ in functions as well as materialization. In fact, while the existing accommodates the productive spaces, the addition combines areas for the community and the school. In terms of materials, the first one has a more industrial character (Aluminium), while the latter reacts to the traditional street houses making use of bricks in a contemporary architectural language. After all, this dichotomy is seeking for an intriguing cooperation that could bring two apparently different structures into one.



RELEVANCE WITHIN A WIDER SOCIAL CONTEXT

The significance of this work in a larger social, professional and scientific framework lies in its approach towards the existing and its identity. In a world where tearing down the old in order to make room for the new is seen as revolutionary, the reuse understands progress differently. This century is engaged in the economic paradigm of globalization, which has brought an annihilation of the singular identities in favour of a greater level of integration. As a result, evaluating the existing is not only driven by economic or ecological motivation, but its importance lies into preserving the identity of the place. The notion of identity does not refer to the place itself and its meaning goes even beyond the community in which it occupies or its artificial experience. It is in fact intended as the space within which human being does exist. In other words, it is a phenomenon that generates from the human and space combination. Having this in mind, how can our practice, as architects, respect what currently exists but also create new future opportunities?

During both the urban and architectural design process I have been asking myself how adequate my proposal for the Anderlecht context was. From the initial stages I aimed to improve the social conditions in the area by working with the existing as much as I could. After having researched and analysed how architecture influences the human appropriation of space, I started to question how my proposal could bring a positive sense of belonging back to the area. For this reason, I decided to rebuild the community around the new craft centre. All along the overall process, my substantial challenge was to find a correct balance between what I called “the co-existence between the old and the new”. Specifically, what struggled me the most has been dealing with the Rotor building steel structure in terms of creating an interesting harmony with the new part.

To conclude, it is my hope that through both my research and design proposal I am giving my own input into what a contemporary approach to architecture could offer in our society. By looking at what is already there with the eyes of creative possibilities, I am hoping to raise the voice into the adaptive reuse practice.