P4 Reflection

Building Craft Centre: Revitalizing neighborhood by appropriating the existing structure of the former Leonidas factory

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Introduction

This paper covers up the development of the graduation project "Building Craft Centre: Revitalizing neighbourhood by appropriating the existing structure of the former Leonidas factory". The various phases of the graduation thesis are going to be reflected on, starting from the early stages of research to the final design proposal, especially giving the attention to the methods that had been used and the argumentation behind it. Additionally, the topic of the studio and my position is going to be described extensively in terms of wider social context and architecture field in general, as well as further plans for the project.

Urban Architecture – Spolia

The graduation lab of the chair of Urban Architecture focuses on Spolia – existing material and immaterial leftovers and their implementation into the new settings. The studio suggests asking questions "What has reached the end of its cycle and what is worth keeping?" and gives the possibility to answer them by restructuring the urban site and deciding whether to go for the new-built or the reuse. The studio opposes tabula rasa and suggests looking at what is already there and how it could be adjusted, redirected, reorganized, or recreated in order to uplift the environment of the neighbourhood. I treat the existing structure of the Leonidas factory (material) and the atmosphere it triggers (immaterial) as a spolia and try to inhabit a new function in it. In this way the revitalization of the neighbourhood is based on the present assets.

Position

I believe that an existing building should not be understood as an icon of an immutable past, but be a part of a dynamic present. Consequently, being a tangible and immaterial artifact of the city, the existing building should be respectfully transformed to fit a rapidly changing context. Unfortunately, this approach was not used in 1992, when in the given site the Fromagerie Bel factory was demolished and a new industrial structure for the chocolate factory had been built instead. Even today the existing structure is not being dealt with by using respectful adaptive reuse strategies – the municipality is planning to demolish the existing structure and build there housing blocks in 2025. I want to oppose today's common practice to threaten such remarkable structures with demolition and redeveloping post-industrial sites to mixed (residential, commercial, non-industrial) uses, instead of dealing with it using respectful adaptive reuse strategies. Even though the existing Leonidas building has lost its role in the community due to the changes of the owners, I want to bring back the importance of industry and production the building carried a few decades ago. It would provide livelihood in the community and strengthen local culture and economy. From an architectural point of view, I believe that keeping the existing building (as an artifact) is an essential strategy to reach such a goal. Even though it is important to appreciate the existing building's ambitions, qualities, and shortcomings, the structure should be upgraded to future proof. The adjusted existing building with its spatial character would be also a catalyst for creating new stories and identities.

Relationship between research and design

The research that I carried out faces the problematics of contextual integration of industrial structures. In order to avoid universal design solutions, standardization, and the placelessness of the project, I believe that the extensive study of the context should be carried out as well as the definition of what the context is and what matters in it should be outlined. However, it is not an easy task to understand the community value, cultural mentality, and the context in general. Due to this, some architects tend to use universal design strategies, which I prefer to avoid because it makes cities clones of each other. It is the task of an architect to react to the existing, and by existing, I mean many-things-in-relation (users, spatial elements, stories, traces, events, discourses, etc.) which should not be approached using traditional research methods that work linearly. By this, I mean that usually the canonical urban analysis is being carried out before starting the design stage, but in my opinion this method oversimplifies the complexity of the existing. Due to this, instead of aiming for the static research result, I aim for a space of discussion, an active communication, a never-ending process that requires combined methods that do not necessarily suggest right or wrong solutions. Having such thoughts in my mind, I started my research of the context and expected that the study would lead to new ways of thinking and help to identify the problems to solve with the design intervention, as well as establish a framework for the design.

Until P1

To contextualize my project, I started my research by looking at the appropriation of the space around the site – the ways people inhabit and claim the space. Until P1 the group work was carried out with Sofia Montalti and Michelle Ho who focused on the architectural language of the street. My personal interest in the concept of appropriation of the space added another layer to the study. The research questions were being raised as such: what are different processes of appropriation present around the site? How architectural language influence different modes of appropriation? The scale of the research was examining one street with a zoom-in of one house. Street of Rue des Bassins, adjacent to the given plot, was chosen to be analyzed because of its mixed typology buildings and due to its duality. The northern side which was considered as residential was more stable meaning that not much rebuild was going on, while the southern part was a combination of industrial buildings and residential and more rebuildings reoccur. The combination of two methods was chosen to examine this: visual analysis and simulation research. Combining both methods helped to identify causal links between the built environment and social practice. In my opinion, the simulation method is beneficial the most when combined with another method, because alone it gives wanted results and it is extensively subjective, while combined it uncovers unexpected patterns and conditions. T e conclusion was drawn that the level of appropriation is tightly connected with the architectural typology, ownership, and usership. If the user has a feeling that space belongs to someone other than oneself, this results in the alienation of the facade and the space around it. However, the study was limited to the visual complexity analysis, which helped to identify the changes in dwellings made by occupants, but no deeper level of studying economic, technical, technological, or social conditions has been conducted.

P1 research: Appropriation of Space (in collaboration with Sofia Montalti and Michelle Ho)
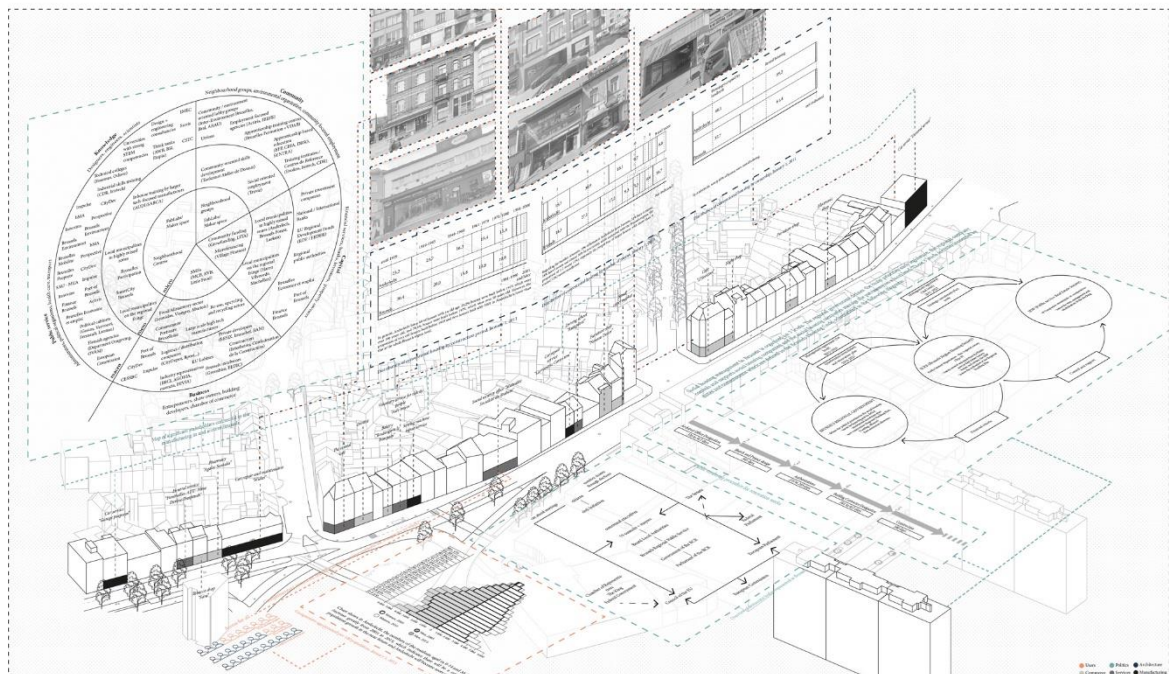
Until P2

Further on, I wanted to fill this gap of P1 research and examine the influences that affect positive and negative modes of appropriation. At this point, I tightly connected my design and research questions: *How existing grid-like structure of former Leonida's factory can host a new function without becoming neutral, contextless? What function would help revitalize the neighborhood?* and *What are the economic, political, historical, technological, regulative, and social conditions that could help localize the project?* I decided to answer those questions by studying the appropriation of space within another scale - street, and neighborhood. Researching architecture, politics, and users and identifying various modes of appropriation was done through the street sections of the neighborhood: Rue Eloy (low-income neighbourhood), (2) Boulevard Aristide Briand – Chausséede Mons (middle-income neighbourhood), (3) Route de Lennik (high income neighbourhood). Those segments were chosen because they undergo various income parts of Anderlecht and connects within one

road. Therefore, I stated that the sectional analysis of this street is also an analysis of the society of Anderlecht. The sections were made by examining few data sources: fieldwork (observing, photographing, taking notes, and sketching) and online data elements (technological, social, political, economic, etc. conditions and the human and non-human actors that create them) and represent the context as a thick situation in question. The chosen method did not suggest final results; however, it is a never-ending process of adding, removing, reorganizing. Thus, this method was rather personal and based on intuition, however, it opened a space for possibilities rather than looking for formalistic arguments. Identifying those conditions has led me to a clear idea of the new program of the building as well as the starting point of the definition of the new spatial character that fits in the existing surroundings.

P2 research: Appropriation of Space: Streetscapes. Influences of public domesticity.

Until P4

This stage was focusing mainly on the design. My research has led me to the idea that the new project should shed light on the production in the neighborhood and offer a place for young people in the neighborhood by providing an inspiring environment. The project was supposed to be grounded into context and trigger dialogue between the neighborhood and local industries; trigger positive ways of appropriation of space in the surroundings, because people value if they feel that they belong to space and has the power to transform it; introduce production as a collective process; make production visible; host environment where students are motivated to learn new skills (vocational training education). Thus, my design task became a transformation project of the Rotor building into a craft center, which offers places for

startups, ateliers and a building craft school, and would be a catalyst for revitalizing the neighborhood.

Studying appropriation of the site and the building also helped me to identify what to keep from the existing building. I decided to keep: the structure, because it was in good condition (cheaper) and flexible (grid can host classrooms and workshops); the atmosphere, because it suits the new programme, it is connected to the making and triggers positive appropriation; the existing ateliers and businesses – Rotor, because it is already involved into education, additionally, it would attract customers, new startups and offer places to do an internship.

However, the spatial character needed to be retransformed. The existing character could be described as isolated, generic, standardized, privatized, however, it has a huge value: it triggers unexpected appropriation, which I want to enhance. As a new characteristic I suggested: being experimental, contextual, triggering hands-on, being publicly open, social, and adaptable. Architecturally, this meant for me to find ways to open up a building (in terms of form and envelope), finding ways to enhance transparency within the vulnerable existing structure, but also shed the light on the factory-like atmosphere where the making happens. Additionally, I wanted to trigger appropriation by reducing thresholds and making many flexible spaces. Other tools to reach this were to provide surfaces to draw onto, to screen on, to lean or pin-up stuff onto, as well as providing spaces to exhibit, to assemble, to store, to gather. Also leaving the stuff unfinished and providing tools to finish it.

My ambitions resulted in a building that facilitates knowledge exchange, cherishes a place-based network of makers, and triggers collaboration between businesses, youngsters, and the community. The building is not only shedding light on the production, but also naturally hosts public functions such as FabLabs, café, and tools shop. In this way various groups of users could meet inside the building. Additionally, appropriation triggers allow users to be creators of the building's atmosphere in this way nurturing them with the feeling of belongingness. In such manner, the building is a cultural and social endeavor, it serves for the community in order to stay relevant in the future.

In this process I have understood that working with the existing buildings requires taking a strong position but not diminishing the site-specific issues and conditions. Additionally, it is extremely important to have in mind users at all stages of the design. The well-being of the human being in the built environment results in either positive or negative appropriation, thus, it is important to study this topic in order to design spaces where people feel a positive and balanced relationship with their surroundings, the same as places that have a potential to be positively appropriated rather than alienated. Studies on appropriation could be an indicator of unsatisfied people's needs and requirements.
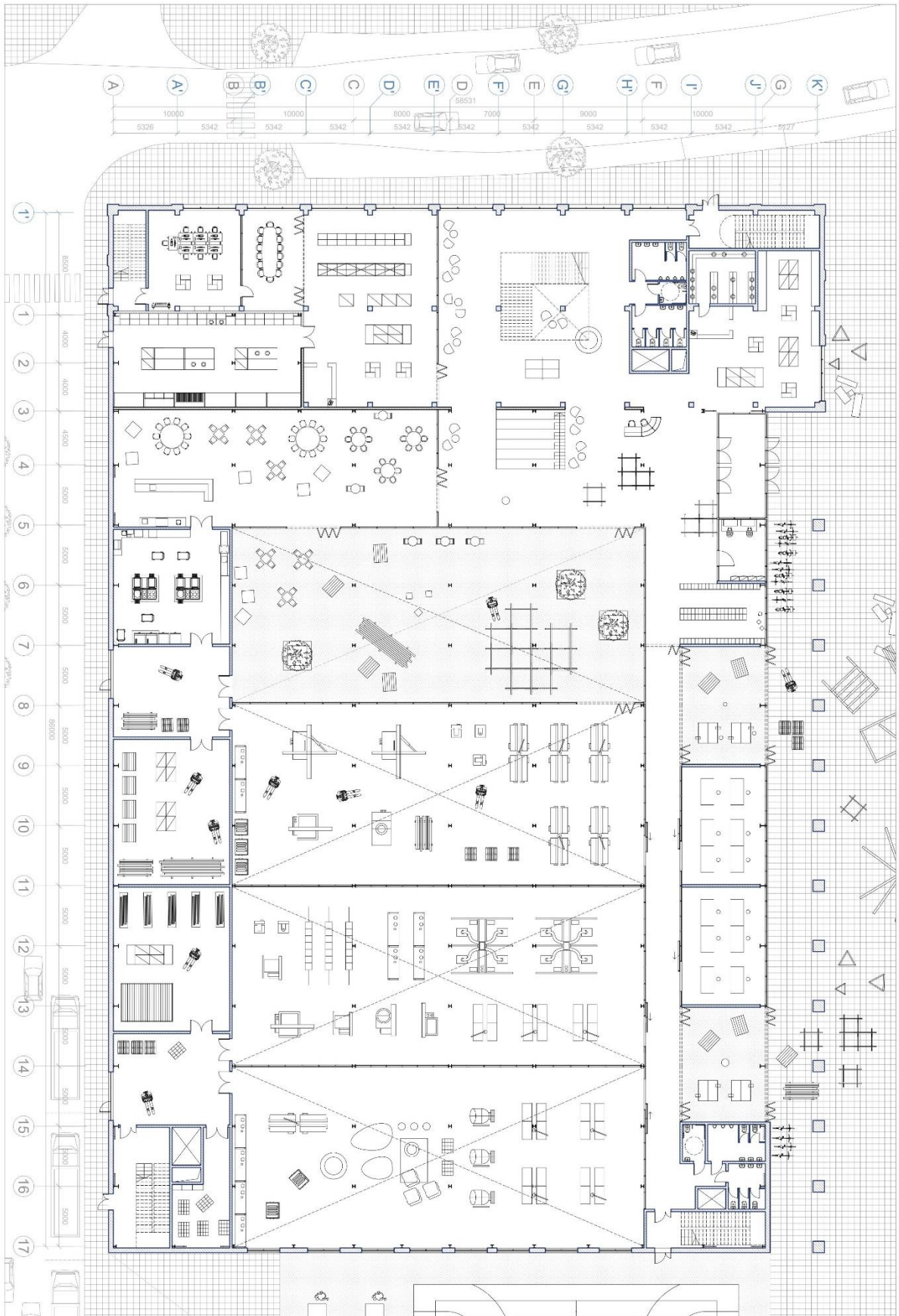
Ground floor plan. Combining approached topics: contextual integration of the existing structure and appropriation of the space.

Social relevance, context, and challenges

I believe that contextual integration is extremely important today when cities are becoming similar prototypes of each other. In the light of globalization, the borders of the space are dissolving the same as the distinctiveness of a space. Enhancing identity results in a sense of belonging, meaning, and the attachment of the society. Even though industrial structures usually have an immense potential of large spatial features, which pushes to adjustable and extremely universal architectural design, it is important to react to the existing. In this way, the new use of post-industrial sites could add value to the ever-changing urban identity and bring manufacturing processes back to the city.

During the process, many times I questioned the relationship between people, buildings, and their environment, the same as architecture's environmental, cultural, and social impact. Especially, what is the role of architecture in terms of appropriation? Conditions for appropriation cannot be created only by architecture, the broader context (politics, economy, technological development) has to come hand in hand. However, in the end, I believe that the architect's task is not necessarily to find the right solution to the problem but open up the question, identify it.

My biggest challenge during the process was to balance between complex topics I targeted with my graduation project – context, appropriation, and how to deal with the existing. At the beginning I believed that studying appropriation could help identify context and then lead to a successful design that would further trigger positive appropriation and revitalize the neighbourhood. Now, I believe that this linear and thorough thinking limited me in some ways because socio-dynamics is way more complex and does not necessarily need oversimplification. Notwithstanding, my architectural proposal reflects this thoroughness by answering the design questions I raised successfully.

Until P5

This stage will cover the presentation design. The biggest challenge is how to represent the context, appropriation, and how to deal with the existing.. Additionally, in this time of the online presentations and absence of physical models, the new ways of representation could be examined. I want to challenge myself with video representation, but this is still open to question.