

INTERIORS BUILDING CITIES

THE INTIMATE CITY

GRADUATION REFLECTION BY PIOTR PRAŻANOWSKI

student number: 4741242

mentors:

Eireen Schreurs

Tom Thys

Jelke Fokkinga

external examiner:

Hendrik Ploeger

Introduction

From the beginning of the graduation studio, our aim was to explore the notion of the “urban intimacy” and to define what “city room”. We all can recognize a good city room in the city, although it is not easy to define because of its complex character. It is an ambiguous term influenced by infinite spatial, material or social qualities that create the character of the particular room. City room is often associated with the space described as the public interior.

Public interiors are the ones, in which we perceive ourselves as free individuals, a space where we distinguish ourselves from the others, where we are aware of our place in the society. Public interior could materialize to be the space of sociability like the great public square in the heart of Paris, space of contemplation, like the old enigmatic gothic church, display and representation like the main hall of the great train station in Antwerp or finally serve in certain purpose like passages along metropolitan cities of Europe. We remember the atmosphere of those spaces more than architecture itself, however “atmosphere” is indistinguishable from the architectural qualities. I believe the essential task of the studio was the understanding of those qualities, to later on, come with a personal architectural proposal in Antwerp, which would respond to the particular context and its problems.

The relationship between research and design

My graduation began from studying metropolitan cities, which urban fabric contains remarkable examples of city rooms. During our visits to Paris we have visited series of public interiors of different scale and representation, which was supposed to help us define our individual understanding of the urban room. I used experiential methods of research such as scriptive descriptions, impression sketches of “moments of intimacy” and based on that, I did qualitative case study of selected objects. Each one of them have been raising different questions of intimacy and contained architectural “things”. These things are: scale, quality of light, decoration, materials, acoustics, corners, form, structure, thresholds, furnishings, colour, proportions, openings, geometry, ambiguity, rhythm, axiality etc. After taking into account different conditions, which contribute to shaping the public interior, in my personal exploration of the theme of the Intimate City, I was interested in a sequence. For example the interior of Gare de l’Est, designed by François Duquesnay in 1849, is a sequence of interlinked spaces providing different light conditions, which is creating unique character for each of them and tension between them. Between each moment in the sequence there is a threshold. It is the moment in the space, which could emphasize the spaces it connects, a border condition, which create intimacy.

In my farther exploration, I was trying to investigate the quality of the in-between space, which resulted in a final P1 design model of a city room. The model and even the final picture, which was taken from the model became a representation of my interpretation of architectural conditions of architect-made of intimacy.

The technique called by the studio “thinking through making” enabled me explore my research in practice. Intuitive architectural decisions did not resulted in a objectively perfect architectural proposal, however it became a perfect tool to reflect on the previous part of research. Existence of a threshold is always connected with layers and depth, which could create an in-between space, which becomes a border between two worlds. The threshold is for me the moment in the space when intimacy occur intensively. The physical model of just the single space became the formal conclusion, which visualised the substantial understanding for such a broad research questions.

By going to Antwerp, I decided to try to find those border conditions and thresholds to propose a programme, which could respond to the particular context and be an interesting and free interpretation of my research. This transition form the research of the ephemeral phrase to the literal programme in particular context was a crucial and a difficult moment in my graduation project.

Context

Antwerp is an example of the city deeply rooted in its river; once a small settlement in a curve of the River Scheldt, today accommodates the biggest port area in the world. My site is located on the Het Eilandje. It is a unique former port area in the northern part of the city. Today, it remains the border between new harbor and the city centre, linking its industry with denser city fabric. Antwerp like most European cities, converts their former industrial areas into residential districts with shops and offices. They push productive activities ever further away from the city. It is visible on Cadix in Antwerp how the former harbor infrastructure is being substituted by mostly residential architecture. However, the research by Nina Rappaport and Atelier Brussels display similar outcome and opt for a different strategy. Industry is afforded a prominent position in the figure ground of the city. I strongly believe that the area like Cadix is the best ground to implement the ideas of the productive metropolis. Specific practical examples provide opportunities and strategies for a city that reconciles living and working, and that makes room for an economy that is inclusive and circular.

I decided to design the complex programme; a home for craftsmanship, culture and people in the spirit of the productive metropolis. This programme includes craft school, atelier spaces and production space, shared among both parties. The programme which could not be described as a public building in its strict sense, aims to bring public visibility to the industry in a place where industry was once forgotten while is still present.

Methodology and design process

Craft school is a very particular building, which makes its architecture distinctive. Diminishing number of vocational schools in Europe cause the situation, in which we lack of awareness and appreciation for their value. This situation provoked me to investigate a significant number of case studies of vocational schools and project strongly related to the industry. School is considered to be as a centre of knowledge; the institution, which passes practical and theoretical knowledge. Qualitative research made me conscious, that apart from showcasing the knowledge, building itself could work as a test object and knowledge creator. Those case studies made me more aware that most of the research solutions could not be implemented successfully in other places, but their characteristic and the way they react to the surrounding, helped me a lot to respond to my context.

During my design process I tried to create a craft school, which is strongly embedded in the surrounding context and together with the additional functions, aims to bring back the relevance of the industry in the neighborhood, which ones was the prominent and productive part of Antwerp. Once architect try to initiate conversation with the neighborhood in which he designs, he should make every effort to explore its character as deeply as possible. I tried to understand and feel the closest surrounding of the site with a series of trips to Antwerp, which resulted in documentation consisted of photographs, dialogues with local people and hand sketches of particular moments in the space.

Relevance

The proposal of the craft school on the border between industry and the city raises the question of the importance of industry in public domain. With both; urban intervention and architectural expression, I tried to address that issue.

I desire that my project could be considered as a first and very significant step in the transformation of a historically important place of industry. My ambition for the building has been embodying the significance of craft in this particular area of Antwerp, with an unusual presence in the urban fabric. Final building serves as both as a showcase for craft skills passed down through generations, but also as a meeting place for the remaining keepers of the industrial knowledge.

The architectural expression of the building is not the bold gesture in its basis. The proposed form is pragmatic, it shares tectonic and material culture with the existing situation. I naturally continue the typology of the shed, displaying potentialities for the sheds in the neighborhood.