

Reflection

Student

Frederique van Erven
4348648

Mentors

Mecthild Stuhlmacher
Daniel Rosbottom
Floris Cornelissen
Paddy Tomeson

Studio

The Intimate City
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Theme and Objectives

The project undertaken this year is based on the theme of 'the intimate city'. The theme considers the city to be a place where people come together, where private selves collude with each other in public. The private is, to a great degree, something that is shaped by the 'public', or more precisely by the collective; the institutions, organisations and devices of the prevailing environment, of which the patterns, forms and representations of the city are a part.

This Design Studio project focusses on the making of a 'city room' in which people can be together, not in the manner of a 'community' –which always suggests the exclusivity of a group– but as different individuals, as subjects within a constantly shifting, heterogeneous, quasi-metropolitan condition. The project is situated in Antwerpen, which is organisationally, spatially, culturally, demographically, and economically diverse. Therefore, it allows for many interpretations and variations on this theme.

In light of the theme and given city, our task was to individually invent a program and locate a site, which exemplifies the notion of what it means to be an 'intimate city'. Subsequently, the city room would elucidate these ideas.

Project summary

The preliminary research into possible interpretations of what it means to be an intimate city and how this could relate specifically to Antwerp inspired an interest into the social spatial practices that Antwerp has to offer. Considering the current political polarisation and therefore the hopes for a more egalitarian society becoming ever distant. The idea of a self initiated, hypothetical, almost utopian project became interesting, to spark alternative, perhaps grassroots, possibilities. As such, the subjects of poverty, gender and opportunity became relevant.

Recent international events, such as the 2018 Women's March and the MeToo movement, show an increasing awareness for gender biases present in society and governments. One of the consequences of a disempowered female position is the 'feminization of poverty', which is a phenomenon referring to the widening gap between women and men caught in a sequence of economic deprivation and scarcity. One particular group of women effected by this phenomenon are single mothers. These women often get caught in a downward spiral of social isolation and poverty. In worst cases, ending up homeless and unable to take care of their children. Seeing the seriousness of this problem, in 2015 project MIRIAM was initiated by the city of Antwerp for these women to aid and support in getting their lives on track.

However, social housing and daycare remains an issue for the mother's in urgent situations. As such, if we understand The Intimate City as a place which makes space for shifting social and political conditions, the manner in which architecture can carve out city rooms within a dense urban fabric in order to facilitate these new societal needs and norms becomes essential.

As such this thesis holds a two part project:

- A women's club which offers itself to members as a resource for the women of Antwerp (and beyond) to engage in intellectual events and as a retreat from the stresses of city life. The club provides the financial and social support for the single mothers of the women's shelter.
- The Women's Shelter provides a refuge for single mothers whom are urgently in need of shelter, aid and guidance to escape from poverty and social isolation.

Research Questions

The new interventions are imbedded in the urban fabric of Antwerp. As the program is not precisely defined, it is necessary to specify and describe the possible size and character of the program which in the best way utilizes the chosen site. In addition, the assignment aims to find the appropriate relation and architectural language that would go hand in hand with the existing, surrounding urban fabric of the chosen site within Antwerp.

What program would address the issues regarding the feminization of poverty?

What would be a suitable location within Antwerp for the decided program? and how does the urban fabric and urban grain of Antwerp work?

In what way does the new program and architectural language relate to the surrounding urban fabric?

What are the restrictions and possibilities of the chosen site?

What needs need to be addressed by the users the club and shelter?

What would be an appropriate architectural language for the two projects?

How do the two worlds come together?

For me the challenge lies especially in this last question. How to consider the polarizing programs and site conditions in such a manner that these worlds still speak the same language.

Research and design

Throughout the whole design process, considering various architectural dimensions was an essential task for me. This is to get to grips with the various approaches and possibilities in order to make informed decisions regarding architectural and social aspects relevant to the project. Hereby, I have chosen a few examples of research that influenced the project greatly.

Research seminar with Mark Pimlott.

In order to prepare for work within the design studio, the seminar with Mark Pimlott invited us to explore architectural and urban precedents, relevant literature, uses of the city, users of the city and methods for documenting and analysing spaces in the city in relation to the year and project themes. As such, the seminar allowed us to gather and analyse a range of writings, artworks, architectural precedents which broadened our perspective on themes and understandings that could be included in the project. For example, the writings and ideas of Loos's Raumplan remained with me throughout the entirety of the project, as well as the exhibition on Jewish salons, which laid the foundation for my project.

Research into the Urban Grain of Antwerp

The research into the workings of Antwerp as a city through all scales and a range of disciplines allowed us to refine methods towards description of urban, architectural and sociological conditions. These findings in turn informed our decisions for the program, site and architectural approach. For example, derived from the historical interpretive analysis allowed insight into both the morphology of the city as well as the social layers and class divides which allowed for the physical manifestation of Antwerp as we know it today. For example, in my personal research the uniqueness of the Antwerp building block (the stoic face of the public street, versus the highly dense usage, more informal usage of the interior of the block) became a metaphor as well as a guiding principle in my project.

Research on architectural language, typology and form through precedents.

During the studio we researched a lot on historical precedents. Considering the dual nature of the project, covering many programs, the research was primarily dedicated to finding the fitting approach for the smallest scale and working from there. Therefore residential typologies became of profound interest. I found it very helpful to use those references to prove my own decisions and guide my thinking into possibilities regarding the architectural language of my project. For example, once one of the tutors suggested to me to use references and understand the system behind the structure, it seemed to help my project tremendously.

Methodology and design process

Considering the theme relating to the city scale, whilst the objective relates to the scale of the room, the design assignment itself already suggests the need to understand and work on different scales and test design decisions through physical models, diagrams and drawings. This methodology of thinking through making is reflected in the overall studio programme and the work of the chair of Interior Buildings Cities.

In this studio we were free to experiment with our own methodology, therefore I personally used a range of approaches.

Diagrams were a useful tool to define the design and to elucidate the main concept. Drawing very abstract diagrams allowed to explain the project back to yourself. This in combination with writing out the story, helps to check whether or not your design decisions are in line with the overall strategy.

In addition, an 1 : 200 urban scale working model was used to consider the urban implications of certain architectural interventions through mass studies. This helped define the scale of the project as it was dependent on what the site would allow for without dominating the surroundings.

Furthermore, the before mentioned analysis of reference projects allowed to both exemplify certain spatial, structural or atmospheric goals that were aimed for and to understand how certain characteristics were obtained. This allowed for the forming of a so-called architectural tool box, which could then be pieced together layer by layer in the project.

Relevance and potential

The approach utilized in this project, both in theme, program and spatial approaches are strategies and ways of thinking that can be employed in a diverse range of contexts. It's again in this duality of a generic and location specificity which allows for flexibility and meaning.

When considering architecture as a social, political and cultural manifestation, the understanding of past, present and future societal norms and values becomes essential in order to create meaningful architectural interventions. The past year (2018) has seen an emphasis in our consideration of the subject of gender. The unequal treatment and opportunities of women in society is on the forefront of our global conversation. As such, thinking of architecture as a vehicle which can embody these shifting norms and/or as simply the container in order to allow these societal movements to take place is valuable.