THE (NOT) ORDINARY ACADEMY
process book

Index

[SLIDE]

Architecture is more than design. *"Design is as precise in its outcome as it is obscure in its process, and it sheds fragile evidence."[1]*

With this quote from "Without Content" by Kersten Geers (office KGDVS) I would like to welcome you to this final step of my two years experience at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment.
I had the wonderful opportunity to attend this Urban Architecture graduation studio, where the topics of the ordinary life in our ordinary cities were approached in a less ordinary way. Therefore, the title of this project (THE NOT ORDINARY ACADEMY) refers also to this not ordinary studio created, always looking for a new way of dealing with architecture.

[SLIDE]

00 / table of contents

The studio topic *Glaneur/Glaneuse* refers to the old 'profession' of the gleaners, those people picking up the leftovers of the agricultural harvest and making out of these food for their families. Architects are called to be some kind of gleaners, too.
In these past graduation months, the site (field) has been read and absorbed. The reading process has been guided by the french architecture theories of *Clement, Lefebvre and Latour*.

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Gilles Clement, in his 'Third Landscape Manifesto', describes how urbanisation creates residues within the city structure, such as vacant industrial areas. 'THE (NOT) ORDINARY ACADEMY' project challenges current urbanisation, questioning its environmental, economical and, mostly, social sustainability, attempting to give a new meaning (function) to these residues. For example, the demolition of the existing factory fabric indeed provides more space for specific urban and architectural developments. However, this specificity requires more time, money and energy than the adaptive reuse of these 'third landscapes', with the risk that city requirements change during their construction. To then mention Bruno Latour's theories, *"…critical attention is shifted from architecture as a matter of fact to architecture as a matter of concern. As matter of fact, buildings can be subjected to rules and methods, and they can be treated as objects on their terms. As matters of concern, they enter into socially embedded networks, in which the consequences of architecture are of much more significance than the objects of architecture."[2]*

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In a general and local context where architecture doesn't engage enough with 'local' political and social contexts, the need to re-consider the potential for architects to be influential and transformative agents of

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[1] GEERS, Kersten – Without content.

[2] AWAN, Nishat, SCHNEIDER, Tatjana, TILL, Jeremy – Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture.

(existing) space grows pressing.[3] Challenging 'mainstream' architecture means fighting norms that shut down other ways of thinking and operating. In fact, in this conflictual environment, many architects find themselves reduced to simple decorative participants improving the marketability of developers' projects. This critique aims to re-evaluate the potential and influence of the architects in the definition of the urban and social space.

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A similar theoretical approach has already been defined by some offices, projects and publications, which suggest other ways of doing architecture to move away from architecture's traditional focus on the look and making of buildings. They aim for a much more expansive field of opportunities in which architects and non-architects can operate and collaborate. These case studies have been presented along with this master thesis to show a transformative intent to make the status quo better: the means are varied, from activism to pedagogy, publications to networking, making stuff to making policy.[4]

Spatial production belongs to a much wider group of actors. In this ecosystem of actors and events, the intention of the research is to narrate the conditions in which an on-site architecture office can ACT as a device to challenge and/or inspire the ongoing developments, investigating in which way this alternative could provide more sustainable solutions with a different urban strategy. The purpose is to assemble a gradual re-appropriation and re-configuration of the leftover buildings whose functions won't be overdetermined, allowing a continuous transition of activities that will increase the value and awareness of these spaces and their potential. More practical, the project is an attempt at how a fast deliverable architecture could be given back to the city with the least and mostly needed intervention possible, all done in the name of presenting a new way of looking at how buildings and space can be produced. How?

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The non-overdetermination of the building's function is based on a simple change of connotation of the existing artefacts (being there spaces, structures or objects, look at this room for example) allowing different conditions to happen while this transition is happening, also after the architect leaves the site.

As written in the studio description, *"architecture grows out of existing conditions and resources."* In fact, the design assignment – as will be presented in the common urban plan – aims to discover and develop the scenario between a vacant industrial site – in its built and unbuilt matter – and the possible opportunities that its vacant spaces can offer, as evidence of the possible cohabitation of public and private domains. In this way, the project detaches from the ordinary academic architectural 'utopia' and looks forward to a more realistic approach with given realistic social, political and architectural conditions, defining the architect's role not anymore as consequential, but rather influential.

Evoking "mixed feelings" (thanks Paul) is a way to express the complexity of this process. As Enrique Walker writes in the foreword chapter of 'Without Content' by Kersten Geers, (referring to architects) *"…they stage a conversation, and situate their work within it. They forge alliances. They establish sources. They delineate sensibilities. They define positions. They declare programmes."* And, as shown this afternoon, they curate.

01 / table of contexts

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To challenge an anywhere status quo, there has to be a somewhere.

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The site we were asked to approach is located in the Dutch city of Maastricht. The city is located in the southern region of Limburg, a peninsula surrounded by the close Belgium and Germany and crossed by the river Maas, two influential elements for the location itself that acts as a connection point.

[3] GARUTTI, Francesco, CCA (Canadian Centre of Architecture – The Things Around Us: 51N4E and Rural Urban Framework (RUF).

[4] AWAN, Nishat, SCHNEIDER, Tatjana, TILL, Jeremy – Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture.

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Its north district called Boschstraatkwartier is a disputed (battle)field where past influential parties, such as monastic orders, international industrial companies and free cultural zones, are living their last days after a long time of existence, resistance, and resilience, leaving obvious consequential traces.

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Nothing remains of the 13th century monastery that once stood a short distance from the old city centre, along the river Maas, today land owned by the SAPPI paper factory, standing evidence of the industrial identity of the city.

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Since 1850, the site has been developing accordingly to the company's ambitions, the evolution in the industrial production in order to host new paper machines aiming to optimise the production and the price of the final product, and, therefore, the consequent necessity of expansion and adaptation, replacing buildings dedicated to host human labor by off-scale warehouses designed based on machine dimensions, the only one still in use today. In fact, the southern (the oldest) part of the site is progressively left vacant or transformed into poorly optimised storage spaces.

Regardless of its definitive 'on-sale' condition since the end of 2021, the last two decades have been characterised by a condition of uncertainty due to changes of property and the decreased interest in paper production, leading, for example, to the partial site vacancy. As the factory has not acquired a decisive urban form yet, this led to different – spatially and legally – solutions, such as squatting (illegal appropriation) or land being sold and buildings being demolished, as part of new (ongoing) developments for the city.

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The site is too big for the company. Consequently, Sappi initiates a selling process in 2003 for its unused spaces and the municipality shows its interest in buying parts of the industrial sites.
In 2010, the paper mill redesigns the accessibility of the site and decides to relocate the truck's entrance to the north, taking advantage of the new speedway built along the northern border of the factory. The southern part of the site is now almost unused.

[SLIDE images of vacancy]

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Initiated in September, the research regarding the relation between the factory and the city led to a guided tour of the site with the Sappi's Public Relations Manager. During this visit, a discussion regarding the future of the paper company gave us the feeling that the destiny of the site was uncertain: the paper-making sector dying and beneficial margins narrowing down. Solutions to optimise production and save money were the highest priority.

December 16th. The news detailing the sale of Sappi Maastricht sounds like a predictable consequence to those words. The future of the factory has never been so uncertain. However, it also represents an opportunity to change the existing status quo and raise awareness regarding the urban responsibility that Sappi Mill has in the city of Maastricht.

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The Sappi factory, with its location in the northern part of the city and its connection with the river and the basin, is a peninsula both connected and isolated from the historical centre. It's an historical presence in the city as it is the last industrial production site still in use in the neighbourhood. Other industrial buildings are being converted into housing and/or collective facilities. The site currently used by the paper factory is located between the inner and the outer ring roads of the city. In that respect, considering its proximity to the city centre, public transport and speedway, it is a very promising site to invest in.

Since 2004, negotiations regarding the acquisition of the site started, and a proposal has been developed in order to preview the reintegration of the site into the city. The municipality of Maastricht agreed on the Belvedere masterplan, a public-private partnership set up by the municipality and private developers that defines the future program of the Boschstraatkwartier. The partial demolition and the purchase of the SAPPI industrial area will provide space for a massive urban re-development with new living, commercial and cultural buildings and public infrastructures. First intervention processes can already be seen, such as the Maas Boulevard deviating though the site in order to reduce the omnipresence of the car in the centre of Maastricht. The urban proposal also explores the partial densification of the site, clearing the south-western site to build new collective housing in relation to the district located on the other side of the canal and basin.

This initial part is planned to be done for early-2023. Meanwhile, the construction of new collective housing is planned to start in 2025, considering the time necessary to get building permits. The master plan also proposes a reconversion strategy of the south-eastern part of the site, along the Meuse. It is also important to underline that the presence of Sappi is preserved, though limited to the northern part. In general, there is a real interest of the municipality to step into the site offering a proposal demonstrating more a sign of ownership on the productive peninsula than an intention to think about the real potential of the site. The growing lack of control over already existing spaces and their possible future development(s) opens a field of reflection on social and political implications.

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02 / an influential presence

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In a time when the future of the factory is even more uncertain, Sappi is facing a crossroads with two main directions. The first one – most visible – is to wait for the highest bidder, with a significant risk of the building's value decreasing due to the lack of use and maintenance. On the other side, we propose an alternative, a second direction: a new influential presence on site.

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To react and adapt to the evolving architectural context, the goal of the on-site office is to explore the relationship between the architectural profession and the 'things around it (us)'. Absorbing and incorporating the knowledge and skills of different experts means expanding the architect's ecological system (a new ecology of practice). An office that takes care of other diverse activities (as previously mentioned, architecture is more than design), such as facilitating collaborations to develop larger/broader processes of transformation. Different offices within an office each of which is responsible – in different steps – for the same intervention. But, none of them is independent of the other.

Regarding the specific case of Sappi, the purpose of this collective is to build up a framework and catalogue of buildings in which interested parties are in a position to choose for themselves (not developers > architects, but architects > developers). "*Like a welcoming occupier*", The Not Ordinary Academy invites people to explore and make visible the potential of these soon available spaces, contributing to the development and survival of a building, a site, and mostly, its spatial exploitation.

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The location choice, therefore, is guided by this influential intention. Locating the collective strategically in the actual Sappi headquarters building fulfils the Urban Architecture expectations of adding a building that can (re)design an entire environment. The original and the current states of the building reflect the multiple facets involved in the transitional process of the site. The ground floor is – and has been – dedicated to the relocation and logistics within the factory: every material that comes in and goes out passes through here. Its position, therefore, provides a good level of accessibility to the other structures on the site. The top floors, instead, host offices and spaces for storage, now mostly unused. This vacancy – apart from creating the building emptiness – changes the perception of it from the outside, too.

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Once a lantern at the entrance of the city, now the building melts with the rest of the industrial boxes around it, as a wall is erected between the city and its surroundings.

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How to retrieve this potential back? The presence of an alternative entity on-site aims to collaborate with the public-private group of parties already involved in the re-definition of the site. The Not Ordinary Academy proposes to insert itself as a framework definer, providing architectural expertise, communication strategies and a change of identity, and connotation.

Through a strategy of persistent permanence (concierge), the project acts as a laboratory for the integration of logic of transitional use, hybrid programs and careful exploration of existing qualities of the building. This attempt in introducing a new field of architecture is part of the response to a classical logic of development: room for manoeuvre is created to introduce a culture of experimentation and to preserve parts of the building from demolition.

This observation, however, is aware of the fact that there's no guarantee of a more inclusive or democratic form of urban transformation but this alternative attempts to create the conditions to actively question what is happening and aim for the just mentioned inclusivity and democracy. It's an approach that allows the design to become a shared concern matter.

Bruno Latour's previous reference *'architecture as matter of fact, architecture as matter of concern'* is crucial at this point in the design. The project itself is made of a series of processes rather than series of finished objects. And the intention of fitting the site again into socially embedded networks is achieved through architectural actions: instead of a shift from matter of fact to matter of concern, here built and unbuilt matter are strictly related.

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As matters of concern, buildings enter into socially embedded networks, in which the consequences of architecture are of much more significance than the objects of architecture.

According to 'Spatial Agency' platform, where Bruno Latour's theory was firstly found, the means through which this action or product is achieved are the following: *Appropriation, Dissemination, Empowerment, Networking, Subversion*

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Appropriation

This can include the taking of another's property for one's own purposes (either legally or illegally, short-term or long-term), or through highlighting abandoned or unoccupied space.

1st step: the presence on site

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Dissemination

This is about the way knowledge is distributed, how it is spread and to whom, as well as the opening up of discussions for a wider debate.

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Empowerment

Allowing others to 'take control' over their environment, being participative without being opportunistic; something that is pro-active instead of re-active.

2nd step: showcasing the potential embedded in the structure(s)

3rd step: changing the connotation of the existing function during the transition process…from a space of production logistic to a space for transition logistic

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Networking

This can be a way of working where a core group of people expands according to each project and the expertise it requires, or a core group that builds its projects around its networks; these are hardly ever static groups and they are highly interdisciplinary and collaborative in nature.

OPALIS network…facilitate the reuse of materials in construction and renovation projects

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Subversion

A tactic / strategy that uses existing policies, guidelines, buildings, etc. for purposes other than those they were designed for.

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As matter of fact, buildings can be subjected to rules and methods, and they can be treated as objects on their terms. Cedric Price's 'Six Strategies for Existing Buildings' have been recognised as the series of processes defining the design developing in parallel to the strategy.

Addition

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Connection

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Insertion

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Reduction

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Expansion

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03 / a consequential action

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The incremental evolution of the Sappi site indirectly challenges the urban transformation proposal planned by the municipality. A continuous incremental evolution defines the factory, based on an expansion linked with the necessity to host a new machine or to store more materials. It's a perfect case study of how such an old industrial site manages to reinvent itself in order to ever more optimise its production process. The evolution, therefore, is dynamic, based on a specific need at a specific moment. When the function is no longer required, the program is changed.

However, the southern part of the paper factory in Maastricht is mostly vacant for some years now. Such transition will require an unspecified amount of time, given the production relocation and/or the (possible)

demolition of part of the factory. As such buildings used to host various functions, such as production, storage and administration, does the decision of Sappi to not exploit them mean they have to be torn down?

This urban proposal is meant to show that these structures are valuable beyond a supposed industrial heritage interest. The speculation regarding such structures illustrates a critical change in the vision of what we design for. Is it to create space? A volume? Or is it to create time? A temporary occupation? As the space is already built and is flexible, it is a question of designing time, of accommodating a usage. Therefore, the option is meanly defined as a direct re-appropriation, setting a vocabulary of least interventions.

The municipality plan underlines a vision of perfection of the city in its most general aspect, a goal to reach. The confrontation of approaches raises questions regarding the static and rigid role of Masterplanning in a society more dynamic than ever. Needs and constraints change fast, an urban project should be able to react and absorb those changes.

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The biggest problem of a Masterplan is its generalisation of the reality, its projection in a final state of a specific area that does not consider the transition, the long process to reach (if it does ever) this completeness. In this latent state of inactivity, waiting for a reconversion to be intended, initiatives regarding a temporary use of a building are more and more observed as the urban reconversion is accelerating, though it is not new. As explored by Dieter Leyssen in his essay "Meanwhile Use as an Act of Resistance", meanwhile use might be related to a form of informal urbanism involving ephemeral structures, cheap materials in an empirical approach of architecture without architects. Meanwhile use is ephemeral and concerns an occupation that moves away from its predicted purpose. Meanwhile use appears during a period of instability marked by the necessary redevelopment of a site in contradiction to a stable period when a building is used for what it has been built for.

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As an example, the Circularium project in Brussels shows a certain interest. The Circularium is a temporary incubator for start-ups located in a former garage. As the owner plans to redevelop the site into a new neighbourhood, 51N4E, a Brussels-based architecture office, proposed temporary use of the site considering the potential it represents during the further development of the new program. The strategy was to catalogue existing potentials in order to target interested users for a period of five years. This process is of course intended to maximise the rentability of the site and keep buildings preserved meanwhile investors are searched a project elaboration is processed.

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Meanwhile use can be an act of resistance against pre-established urban redevelopment strategies. It can show that a building can host very different functions. But it might also be used for financial gains only with no consideration for what socio-economic inputs have been created.
In that respect, we believe the conditions of the Sappi site can accommodate deeper thinking about a direct urban re-appropriation of factory vacant buildings. What we aim to propose is not a temporary occupation made to keep buildings maintained before the beginning of the renovation phase. It is, instead, a strategy of direct action underlining the smallest intervention possible to make the site pleasant to live, work and be entertained in. A framework made to absorb changing conditions in opposition to the proposed static masterplan.

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An initial inventory of on-site conditions is particularly important to understand how to proceed.
As an industrial presence is supposed to be preserved on site the existing safety protocol and its reconfiguration are part of the values recognised on site. Through a series of map analyses, a defined perimeter based on actual production intensity has been elaborated, with its location on site, the danger level and the available buildings.

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The site benefits from an ideal location well connected at three different scales. Besides its proper location, the factory campus takes also advantage of a series of tools and facilities that have an important potential to use more collectively, also as a way to better optimise its use and consequently its costs. An example is the power plant. Tthe amount of electricity produced exceeds the needs of the company. Therefore, it has been decided to sell electricity to the municipality to provide energy to surrounding districts. The same happens with water and heat, the other two components of paper production. This heat is converted into hot water and distributed through the local heat network to supply houses and surrounding buildings.[5] A relevant scenario for a rapid re-appropriation of the industrial site is possible.

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However, considering the existing condition implies considering the planned and initiated municipality plans, as the demolition of part of the southwest side for the construction of the Maas Boulevard extension. Then, the fragmentation of the rest of the Sappi campus has to reach a more inclusive organisation, also implying making the site accessible for different actors. A more inclusive and liveable area implies also certain levels of comfort: security, natural light and accessibility (as shown in the project). In that respect, the strategy towards the re-appropriation of the site aims to change the built dense configuration into a more porous and fragmented neighbourhood. By organising buildings around residual plazas and courtyards, the circulation is meant to be more spontaneous as well as offer a framework to be appropriated by local communities

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The most important step towards the transformation of the factory is to make people want to come in. In that respect, the ground floor is the interface between the city and the different functions and facilities. It is the most synthetic definition of what a public space is. The spatial organisation of the new site relies on that: open spaces are public incubators, and there is no privatisation of them. Concerning public spaces, the ground floors of buildings represent the materialisation of a second threshold.

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In this attempt of limiting the time of action, a necessary condition has to be considered. The purchase of the site as a whole is an important investment whose redevelopment would imply another important amount of money. The presented strategy, therefore, implies a progressive reconversion of the site with the incremental occupation. This idea reflects the notion of creating an adaptive framework able to absorb changing demands and constraints.

Step 1: presence on site

Step 2: valorisation of the waterfront

Step 3: clearing the heart of the old factory

While the site re-integrates the neighbourhood and collective housing around are still in the building phase.

04 / final reflection

I would like to finally reflect on this process mentioning the lecture by Julian Lewis (from East Architecture, London) given as a kickoff for our P3 presentation. As part of the Urban Architecture process, the main matter discussed was " the city exists, but what it is? " Seeking to engage with the existing city as a living generative condition rather than a masterplan with sites, 'imagining the present' acted as a cardinal point for most of the student's reflection, with the main result that follows: in an urban context life is the foreground on an architectural background. "The gleaning that A. Varda observes is about valuing and using what has been discarded. This has an equivalent in architecture (both in the urban context and in the architectural practice itself). Not just in reusing, though that is intrinsic to the gleaner, but by seeing more openly, being more precise about value, finding more; especially where conditions seem unpromising, or almost absent".

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[5] VAN NOESEL, Pjotr, BENOIT, Pierre-Loup, PONG, Lee, FENG, Zhenduo, KWAKKERNAAT, Nina, VAN LEEUWEN, Isabel – CITY AND FACTORY, A research in the relation between the Sappi-factory and the city of Maastricht.

In this graduation journey, the 'more' that had to be found have to concern with a personal investigation. As Shohei Shigematsu mentioned in his Berlage session at TU Delft, to be investigators of the society, architects have to be firstly investigators of themselves (OBSessive OBServation). Reflecting on our work is an attempt to question and to clarify the room for manoeuvre that architectural practice has. As previously mentioned, the design and research aim to deal with this obsession with redefining the architect's role within the urban definition. Conflict and complexity are at the very heart of urban transformation. As an ongoing exploration that scans the boundaries of architectural practice, it challenges the self-image of architects and urban designers, which is often more concerned with autonomy and monologue than with openness and dialogue. This observation led to a way of designing and thinking not only increasingly necessary and programmed but, in the end, an obsessive pleasure.