

Reflection Graduation Studio Urban Architecture

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One year ago, as I was searching for a suitable graduation studio, a particular sentence from the Urban Architecture folder caught my attention: "We invite inquisitive, creative, and sensitive students, resourceful in their research approaches as well as in their design ventures." This sentence emphasized the importance of soft skills and contextual understanding in architecture, which resonated with me. During the Urban Architecture graduation, I delved into closely examining the daily life of people and understanding the rhythm and pace of the city. Through observational research and fieldwork with the help of Explore Lab student Jonas Althuis, we captured with film the movements and interactions of those in the neighbourhood, emphasizing the contrast between the sometimes large and harsh architecture and the subtle daily life in between. Also during the explorative field trips with the Invisible Cities group, we uncovered hidden stories and social dynamics. These experiences provided invaluable insights into the neighbourhood, shaping my design approach.

The research with the Invisible Cities group played a significant role in my fieldwork, guiding me to explore beyond facades and engage in intimate gatherings. We fearlessly ventured into public, communal and domestic spaces, driven by curiosity. These experiences deepened my understanding of the hidden stories and vibrant social dynamics of the neighbourhood. I realized the essence of architecture lies in serving as a stage for human stories, with the people being the protagonists.

Furthermore, my project explores inclusive ways of living, addressing the lack of female-friendly and inclusive architecture while remaining site-specific. I draw inspiration from places like Kalkbreite in Zürich and Inez Elmouden's women's house in Antwerp, which showcase the transformative power of architecture in creating empowering spaces.

Among the feminist literature that greatly inspired me, I found the works of Anna Puigjaner and Leslie Kern particularly influential. Their writings provided valuable insights and alternative perspectives on architecture, gender, and inclusive design, which enriched my understanding of creating empowering spaces for all individuals. Throughout this year I learned that architecture can shape a more equitable society and offer tangible solutions for a more inclusive built environment.

Reflecting on my journey, I've learned the importance of observing carefully, embracing challenges, and actively engaging with the community. My tutors' guidance has been instrumental in shaping my perspective, encouraging me to create a design that is responsive, respectful, and human-centered. During my research, I employed various methodological approaches to gain a deeper understanding of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants. I utilized observational research, interviewing, filming, recording, and photography sessions to capture daily life and activities. I also had strolls through Bressoux and Droixhe with women from the neighbourhood, allowing them to guide me and share their stories. They also let me join their cooking workshops and French lessons. These experiences brought me closer to the community of the area. Throughout this process, I tracked our paths, made notes, and encouraged them to contribute their perspectives.

My journey also revealed my personal lenses and interests, which played a significant role in shaping my perspective. I realized that I naturally look at a place to find points of improvement, and

these points became the inspiration for my design. Feminism, social aspects, historical influences, daily life, and the people themselves emerged as my primary lenses and personal interests.

In my historical research, I heavily relied on the work of Charlotte Delobbe, who I had the opportunity to meet through Justine Gloesener, a PhD student at the Faculty of Architecture in Liège. The encounter with Justine at a neighbourhood party, to which the Invisible Cities group was invited by Manu, an artist and engaged community member, allowed me to access Charlotte's research and insights. It is worth noting that my fluency in French and my determined and open character played significant roles in establishing these connections and collaborations.

With the Invisible Cities group we actively invited ourselves into community gatherings and events. We were able to get in touch with these individuals thanks to photographer HJ Hunter, who had spent several months in the neighbourhood creating a report. Hunter's presence and dedication demonstrated the challenges of truly connecting with the community in this area. Our proactive involvement and the relationships we built were essential in understanding the neighbourhood's dynamics and uncovering the hidden stories.

These experiences and connections shaped my design approach, ensuring that the architecture reflects the stories and voices of the community, and bridging the gap between people and their built environment. Impressed by the already vibrant character of the community, I wanted to ensure that my project did not disrupt people's daily lives but instead emphasized the already present strengths of the community. My research revealed a pressing need for more representative spaces dedicated to public and communal gatherings that would cater to everyone, irrespective of their religious or cultural background. Simultaneously, I recognized the importance of creating a space specifically for women, given the challenges they faced and the role they played in the neighbourhood.

During the tutoring and presentations, I received valuable feedback from my tutors that have shaped my perspective. In P2, I recognized a contrast between the colourful, human, and intuitive qualities of my research and the black-and-white representation of my relatively generic design. This inspired me to create a more colourful and materialized design that aligned with the research's qualities. In P3, the tutors pointed out, after my relatively unnuanced critique on the modernists, that my project also shared some values with their work, leading me to realize the need for balance and connection in the area.

Furthermore, the P3 presentation was titled "Design Through Dialogue," but the feedback highlighted that my methodology was not strictly designing with the people. I learned that designing together with future users requires engagement, interest, and a shared understanding. Although arranging meetings and gathering opinions proved really challenging in Droixhe, I recognized the importance of involving individuals who have the time, speak the same language, and feel connected to the project.

I also discovered that designing biobased structures in an urban context presents its challenges. I realized that creating a building that people can relate to and recognize is crucial for its longevity. It should blend seamlessly into the surroundings and not appear out of place. The building's ability to fit in is essential for its sustainability, as demonstrated by the demolition of the former modernistic buildings on the site. Sustainability also means creating something that can endure.

Another significant realization was regarding my personal safety as a woman during the research process. People from the neighbourhood advised me against going alone, highlighting the importance of personal safety precautions. Therefore, I am grateful for the opportunity to conduct research collaboratively with the Invisible Cities group and Jonas, which provided a sense of security.

In addition, I am aware of my position as a white, educated woman with a European background. I initially struggled with projecting my ideas of emancipation onto individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds. However, over the course of this year, I have taken the time to reflect on this matter.

As a result, my perspective has evolved. I have reached a point where I no longer aim to impose a different mould on people through my design. Instead, I propose an alternative way of living with the building. Participation is not compulsory, and individuals are free to choose their level of engagement. Moreover, I have designed the program and layout of the building to be highly site-specific. I have based my program choices on existing social activities and organizations already active in the neighbourhood. This approach ensures that my building integrates seamlessly into the existing fabric of the community, rather than appearing as an isolated structure in an open field.

Overall, these lessons have contributed to my growth as both a designer and an individual. They have deepened my understanding of the complexities and nuances involved in architectural projects and reinforced my commitment to bridging the gap between the community and architecture, ensuring that the design reflects their stories and amplifies their voices.