

Reflection Paper

HUMUS TO HUMAN:
Repository of Remembrance

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On Last Green in Town

This year's Urban Architecture graduation studio 'Last Green in Town' revolves around the complex dynamics of the La Friche Josaphat site in northeast Brussels and addresses the role of 'the architect', positing that architects function as mediators between social, political, and cultural concerns. With our research-based approach and design capabilities, architects possess the unique capacity to address issues. This is especially crucial in tackling the intricate dynamics in this case of La Friche Josaphat site outlined in the problem statement. This former marshaling yard transformed into a wild environment. The site faces conflicting perspectives and interests, primarily between ecological preservation and human occupation.

A new view on living with existing nature in the city is needed and the studio dares the students to dive deep into this topic and eventually develop new strategies and architecture that can be a mediator between the city and the natural environment.

On La Friche Josaphat

The Urban Architecture Graduation Studio is research-driven with a site-specific focus on the physical, social, cultural, historical, and political dynamics. Besides that, it asks for an inquisitive, creative, and sensitive approach towards the site. In the brief, it says the studio is focused on medium-size urban sites investigating qualities of the aspects and dynamics mentioned before.

La Friche Josaphat site in northeast Brussels, a former marshaling yard that transformed into a wild environment. The site faces conflicting perspectives and interests, primarily between ecological preservation and human occupation. The property, under the ownership of a development corporation, is on the edge of changing into a densely populated residential zone. Situated in Schaerbeek, a multicultural municipality, it is crucial for this upcoming neighborhood to seamlessly integrate with the existing community. There is a need for the current residents to feel represented, a sentiment that is currently missing.

The challenging aspect of this site was its scale. We started the studio with fragmented research on smaller aspects of the site and after the P1 presentation, we were asked to come up with an entire vision for the La Friche, consisting of research and a full masterplan. Often these kinds of large-scale visions are developed over a long period with many different perspectives. The task is how to get a grip on this huge site to finally come up with our own proposals during P2.

On research

At the start of the studio, we split the group into smaller research teams to gather information in groups to understand the complexity of the topic of 'last green in town' and of the site. This resulted in a collective research exhibition showing multiple perspectives. I worked on "An Ode to Ordinary Life" as a collaborative study focused on the residents of Schaerbeek municipality, delving into their diverse cultures, histories, and daily experiences, through observation the research uncovers community dynamics, public space usage, and the influence of context on daily routines. It emphasizes the subjective nature of belonging, crucial for individual well-being, and explores the relationship between identity and place, highlighting the belonging of diverse communities within Brussels. This was the starting point for my fascination.

I continued this research focusing on the sense of belonging, and questioning when people feel grounded in Brussels, delving into the meaning of 'soil' and its relationship with humans. This research examined how the connection with soil influences a fundamental aspect of human identity and belonging. I extended my research into studies about the symbolic and religious meaning of soil.

From this moment on my research connected to the general focus of the studio. I questioned how soil, especially in cultural or religious contexts, can express the connection between La Friche and human identity, and what impact it does have on the preservation of flora and fauna. Together with Prajwal Gaikwad and Tarini Vajpei we worked on an urban vision together with a manifesto opposing the new way building architecture and living in an existing natural environment. The master planning process begins with an analysis of the existing "as found" Friche, examining ground conditions, vegetation, ecological hotspots, and traces of human intervention. The Friche, a palimpsest of layered soil. Speculating on the Friche's future, there's potential for rewilding, with concrete removal and natural growth. The industrial port's edge presents an opportunity for this transformation, bridging the Friche with urban green spaces.

Having this solid research of the site made it manageable for us to develop our own proposal in this master plan, functioning as the mediators between La Friche and the city.

On design

I aimed to create an architectural proposal that addresses this relationship between La Friche and human identity, reflecting the profound importance of soil in shaping identity and the sense of belonging. The design proposal therefore results in a repository of remembrance. A place can be used for the preservation of stories and artifacts as a remembrance of loved ones who passed away or remembering the country in which a person was born and raised. The project is located on and around the former Christmas tree plantation being a serene and contemplative environment providing a peaceful setting for reflection and solace.

After the P2 I got comments about who I am addressing in this proposal. I was still an undefined project, mainly by the fact that a repository that I had in mind does not particularly exist yet. Alongside this it raised questions about the relation to the city, how do people approach this architecture. Therefore, I reformulated the program of the project more into created a combination of a remembrance space underneath/connected to a buffer ring of housing protecting the pine tree garden.

On methods

For this project, I did not decide on one particular method of working. For research, I felt that the new sources I found also brought new ways of working. I employed diverse methods such as drawing, photography, mapping, and reading to for example delve into the symbolism of soil in cultures, religions, and societies. Through sketching and drawing, I captured details in the as-found research of the Friche that helped me a lot with understanding the site. By depicting every little element by hand (drawing) you read the location completely differently than using premade online data maps.

I think my analog way of working has helped me a lot in expressing my way of thinking about the topics relating to research and design. I do think because of the complexity of my project I sometimes got lost in the information and research that I collected. It was difficult to keep looking at the bigger image and stay zooming in and out. Also, when it comes to using different methods, it maybe would have been a more consistent process if I had chosen to work in fewer forms of media. But on the other hand, I know that this is how I always work, I get excited by the new things I see and learn, and I can't get enough of delving deeper and deeper into the meaning of my project. The studio represents intensive contextual research and design based on context. I do think it was also needed for me to keep on going back to the research while designing to make more meaningful decisions in the design as well.

On moving forward

In this last phase of this graduation project, I want to finalize all the products that I have so far. After discussing that my methodology was so diverse, I now want to connect all the visuals, sections, and plan drawings of this project into one and my strongest skill, hand drawing. With this, I want to show the depth of my project together with in one final product alongside the other products that are expected. This product will be a full integration of the research and the design. I want to show that those are together in my project and that research did not stop while designing and the other way around. This product will be a large (thinking of 1.5 x 1.5 meter-ish) architectural hand drawing of my whole project, unfolding the stories of remembrance that I have collected over time. My design of the repository of remembrance provides a system/structure for the users for appropriation and ownership. It's not up to the architect how users should remember the loved ones who passed away. That's why I will use that knowledge from other as a possible infill of the repository.

The product should contribute to a rich tapestry of insights, fostering a journey of discovery and appreciation for the diversity of human expression and interaction.