Nijmegen heterotopia: the re-use of alterity and authenticity in Molenpoort.

P4 Reflection

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INTRODUCTION

The following paper is a reflection on the progression of my graduation project from the initial phases of the research to the final design proposal. In the first part, I will explain the topic of the graduation studio, the approach, and the personal development of the research. Second, I will analyse the undertaken research methodology and the interdependency with the design development. Finally, a reflection will display the relevance of the design and research proposal within a wider social context.

BRICOLAGE STUDIO

The theme of the studio comes from the French term "bricolage" signifying human endeavour, improvisation as a necessary act to incorporate in the creative action. Levi-Strauss in the first chapter of his book "The Savage Mind" stresses the validity of the mythical thought mixed with a scientific one talking about them as a parallel way of thinking, but never opposite.

"Bricolage" is the appropriation of materials with a specific usage that are ready-to-hand to inspire a new object. The materials lead to a new function and turn upside-down their meaning, for the purpose of transmitting new knowledge.

We live in a society where everything we need can be found, be bought, or be discovered. Especially due to technology we are losing interest in curiosity, creativity, and difference. The Bricolage approach makes us wake up from the flow of growth and consumption, of speed time, and repeatability, letting us take a break and focus on the essence of us just like human beings part of our natural environment.

We start from the common things, the ordinary and extraordinary and we take advantage of them. We highlight what is around us, what we forgot about. Instead of avoiding it or beating it, we simply use it, or reuse it and revalue it as our local resource. We have to start to have a critical look at what appears simple, ready, and time-saving. We have to accept our environment for what it is, for

what it offers, valuing the rawness of it.

In the architecture field, we do it starting with history, traditions, local materials, and local needs. By acknowledging the value of what is found in a specific context, with a bricolage approach the architect is able to create an awareness bridge between pre-existence and new unpredictable outcomes, new economy, and societal values.

RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

The bricolage studio implied a multidisciplinary approach to research and design, inspiring new insights and studying diverse perspectives of social science. The bricolage approach helped to find meaningful objects on-site and giving them a fresh voice based on ecology in a new temporal span, highlighting the meaning of an alternative vision and the relevance of practice to the forthcoming: adaptive reuse. We as bricoleurs deeply investigated the objects found and made use of persistence as the leading element for the future outcome.

The research was divided into two phases: the first phase focused on reading the city of Nijmegen through diverse themes such as history, post-war development, topography, inhabitants, and economy. Secondly, the research followed in P2 actively approaching the city with new possible changes and contextualized urban shapes.

Phase I
Starting with the question "What time is this place?" the city of Nijmegen was analyzed not only by collecting primary and secondary sources, but also fieldwork, necessary to understand personal impressions and people behavior on the site. The different perspectives and the group work helped to improve the city's understanding and make a collage of valuable objects to further investigate. Draw-

ings, models, collages, images, were made as retracing the history of the buildings and the culture related to them, helping us to identify the relationships among them and let emerge their personalities along with their development in the urban panorama. "What time is this place?" became a script, a composition of written and drawn inquiry of the architectural language of the place, a dialogue among objects that shaped one to another.

From three stories of three characters, the story became one dialogue of three different anthropomorphized buildings, with three different idioms that the short movie allowed to transform in one, with a specific urban position, making it understandable and accessible for everyone.

Phase II

In my personal research, I decided to focus on the value of the fragments of a place, especially focusing on the hidden layers of the city of Nijmegen, both material and immaterial. The social and historical analysis of Phase I allowed me to create a detective collection of special images meaning fundamental qualities to bring to the design development. Site impressions and writing permitted me to retrace relevant hidden symbols of the place, going back in time and seeing layers and connections that were not visible before.

The design and research developed in a Lexicon of bricolage definitions of Nijmegen, becaming a new way of

recomposing an understandable language as a research product that could be shared but also interpreted by everyone. Opinions and confrontation were necessary as an external line of communicating and understanding, a way of considering a different perspective, knowledge, and new possible outcomes. The research highlights the value of the context, related to typologies, fragments using beguinages as a guiding reference as urban enclaves that generated positive alterity worth repropose in the contemporary city. Moreover, in the "Bricolage layout" I propose an interpretation of the term bricolage from a theoretical and practical framework including works of art, literature, architecture, design as representative elements of the approach. The layout concludes with some of my critical conclusions to design with the aim of diffusing the concept of bricolage as a guiding approach that everyone should consider, and find the bricoleur hidden in them.
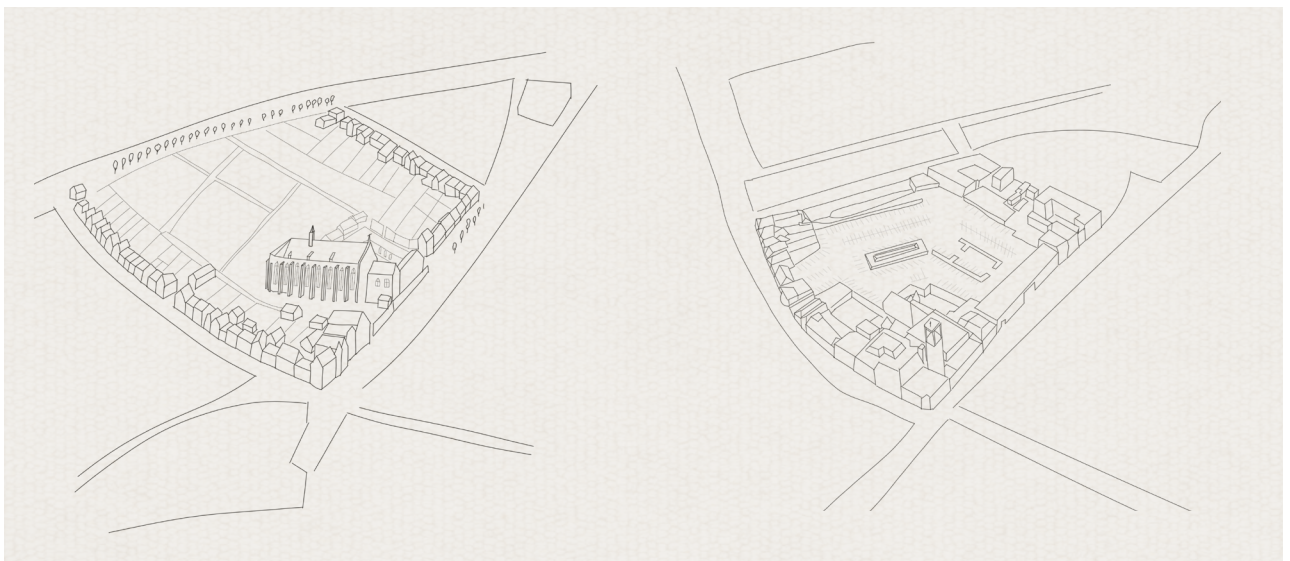
Sketches, 2021, L.Piccinin.

DESIGN AS A NEW RESEACH LANGUAGE

The architect as a detective collects a variety of objects creating a narrative that contributes to the single object but also gives new functionality to it. The object does not have the function it had before, but being memory of it can transform from ruin to memory. It is here when tradition and innovation come together.
The power of fragments is given by the unawareness of all the narratives related to them and the power of the human brain to create them. For how much we would like to know it, we will never be able to retrace it completely, so we are given the chance to integrate them in our present and the future generation forthcoming hoping that they will inspire more and more everyone.

The design was approached in two main phases: the first phase shaping the urban realm and the second the architectural one, working in interconnected levels of scales, allowing the architectural design to be part of a whole urban environment.
Starting from context, morphology, and typology, the city was approached considering the existing relicts as input for other creative acts: they are the inspirational elements of the new architectural language, originators of comprehensible and inclusive dialogue with the existing context, representation of the local culture.

Phase I

The first step of the urban research was conducted in a group, considering demolition as the design choice that should bring resilience and balance between what was already there and what should be there. A new urban language started to take structure, restoring the old route passing to the site at the side of the Church: the demolition both restores a pre-existence and shape it depending on what is there to enhance new possibilities, new adaptations, and heterotopias. The demolition aims to introduce open spaces that remove cars and the fast-speed environment from the city center to establish a calm environment composed of views, nature, different environments of publicness, collective and private spaces. Demolition becomes the project itself, the shapes are formed by the existing structure, and emptiness spaces are where life takes place.

Phase II

The iterative bricolage process of the design was fundamental to have insights, adjustments to reshape the design making it comprehensible and inclusive.
Arguing, testing, trialing, and reflecting brought to the realization of

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conclusus

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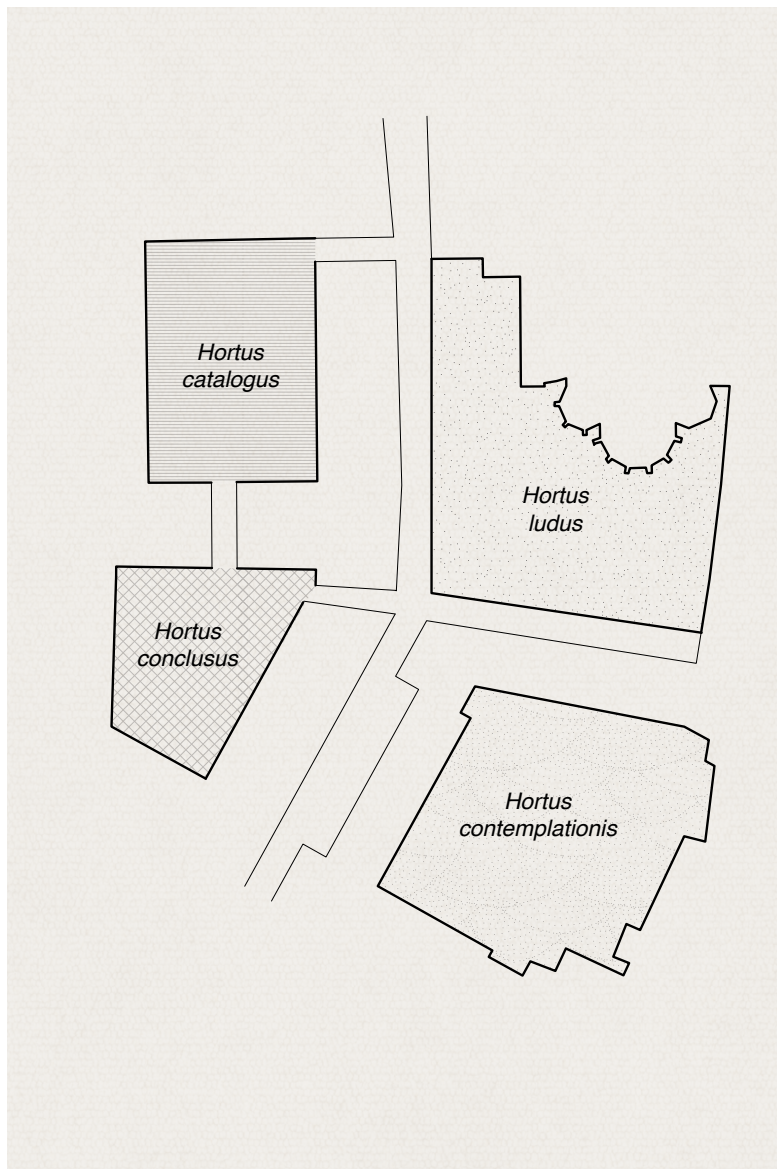
Drawing, 2021, L.Piccinin.

the four courtyards composing the site, allowing the site to acquire a different type of collectiveness and privacy in the urban space that a long time ago was present on the site.

The new urban chapter came with the will of proposing an urban enclave for the city, a place for inspiration and slow pace, in contrast with the fast speed of the city to the shopping ruts. Early examples of urban enclaves were beguinages, calm places for laywomen where the collective rule was social solidarity. As miniature utopias, the beguinages can be considered fragments of the ideal cities, valuing differences, connection with a whole but not imposing anything spatially or socially. Valuing the original local qualities of the site, the old traces of the place are reintroduced in the context, with the same principle, but responding to contemporary societal needs. The architectural design aims to generate a simple urban shape, understandable and recognizable for everyone, a new symbol for the city, but also a heterotopia of activities and people.

RELEVANCE ON A WIDER SOCIAL CONTEXT

The significance of this project in a larger social, professional, and scientific context lies in its approach towards the existences and their diversity as a unique identity shaped by the context it belongs to. For identity is meant the unreproducible feature of a place that is shaped over time by local traditions, culture, and human behavior. Identity may be inherited or modeled upon time experience, it is something unreproducible and unique that belongs to a specific place and architecture is the physical representation of it. Nijmegen is a city where ethical dilemmas of capitalism have prevailed, where the economic interest has overshadowed the local tradition and culture. The research and design aim to raise questions about valuable spaces as the celebration of culture, inclusivity, diversity but also gender. Beguines are characters that in history have been associated with the religious movement, but they were independent laywomen researching for a not patriarchal environment, reaching alterity to create gender equality and solidarity. The research and design aim to highlight the importance of inclusivity in a problematic context as a broader framework of heterotopia as an exemplary scenario of change at all scales. From urban to architectural, social, and material, the reuse of alterities, the research of change, of not conformity, of re-use generate authenticity of the self, the spaces and the materials.

To conclude, my hope, through both my research and design proposal, is to raise questions about the real quality of architecture as representation of social daily life, especially the importance of minorities groups in the social panorama, in the case of beguinages of powerful laywomen researching a different way of living not constricted to the patriarchal leadership that has been hidden by the patriarchal history.

The past needs to be perceived as it is, being it an infinite field of knowledge where many things we consider have already happened. Analyzing pre-existence, valuing their relation to the social context opens a door to creative possibilities, interactions, and composition of spaces as heterotopias. Many people research alterity because they choose for a different condition in an unequal society, the role of the architect is to propose spaces that are authentic and resilient, allowing heterotopias to take place at all scales: from social to material.

This project enabled me to face challenges at all scales that I found really difficult to face before, because they are shadowed by society. I acquired more knowledge in my process and more flexibility, opening my design and research approach to multidisciplinary and unforeseen. I am confident that I will carry this process in my career, hoping that this theme will raise more and more in the architectural debate for being relevant for our future as architects but also architecture's users.