



Two friends, Inès van Rijn (2022)

Claiming space, safety and network for the women of Droixhe and Bressoux

Research Plan
Graduation Studio
Urban Architecture
Inès van Rijn
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1. Introduction

“What are you doing in this bar? Aren’t you engaged?” is what one of the Italian men asked me in their bar. Should I be engaged? And if I were, is going to a bar in that case a strange thing to do? After this interrogation he advised me to go home before it would get dark, “women are not safe here on the streets”. While walking back I realised that I indeed had barely seen women in the streets, let alone joining social activities. “Women in this neighbourhood need kids or dogs to go outside”, someone told me. I started looking in parks and schoolyards, where they were indeed chatting in small circles. But my direct and critical questions were this time answered with an awkward yet friendly smile. So the journey continued in a mosque, where we were warmly welcomed by Ibrahim. When I asked where the women can sit, he told me “in the back”. This reminded me of photographer HJ Hunter’s interview with Marième, who said “many migrant women feel they live between a rock and a hard place. They live in a society with constitutional rights and freedoms for all citizens, but feel like they are kept under the thumb of their husbands and families”¹.

2. Relevance

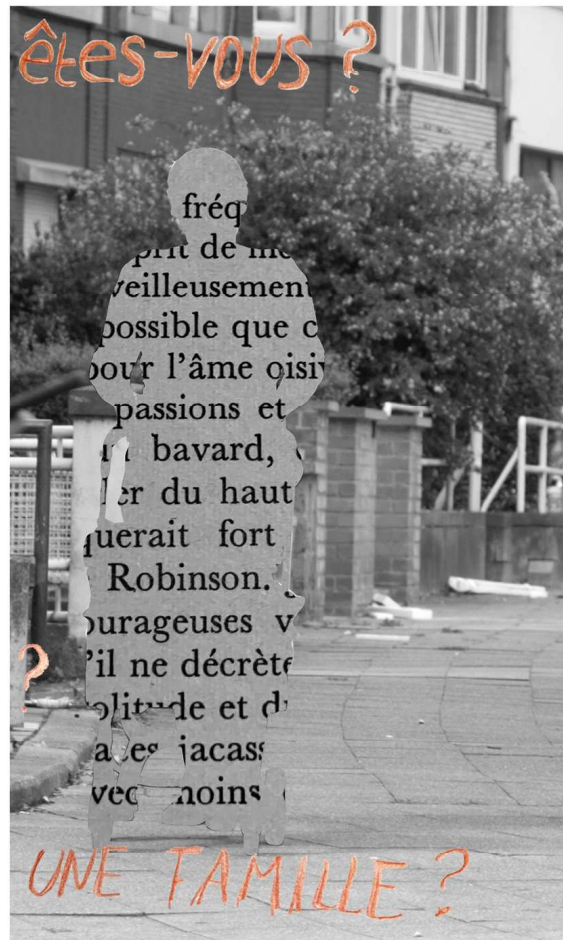
Bressoux and Droixhe deal with strongly conflicting visions on the rights and freedoms of women. It touches me to see that so many women experience inequality. By expecting them to take a caretaking role, one limits their opportunities to enjoy life’s possibilities.

The few women I saw outside; the patronising visions on women through the eyes of Bressoux’s men and the unsafe feeling women and young girls experience, motivated me to look at social inequality translated into the physical and unphysical world. The large number of literature written about this subject (reference list 5.1) will help to support and develop my personal research. I find it hard to believe that the current urban circumstances meet the needs of women in the neighbourhood, with only a muddy park, an asphalt square and very few spaces for indoor social activities.

Critically reflecting on the position of women in the neighbourhood could open a debate, and not only improve their lives, but also that of other inhabitants. The more diverse and accessible it becomes, the more enjoyable and enriching for all.

My graduation project will be built from two types of material; the physical and the unphysical. Starting with the unphysical material, I will study the users, their daily lives, social structures and opinions on the neighbourhood. The physical symbolises architecture, public spaces and objects. Studying the relation between the two will give me an understanding of the women’s interaction with the urban context and architecture. I believe this is a good starting point for the next step; the design process, during which I will concentrate more on topics such as the reuse of local materials as tools to establish suitable spaces for the users.

VOUS ALLEZ OÙ ?



3. Intention

Because I think there is a lot of potential in Droixhe and Bressoux to improve the domestic, shared and urban spheres for women, I came with these research questions:

1. How can a safe space for women from Droixhe and Bressoux be created?
 - What does a safe space mean to the women of Droixhe and Bressoux?
 - What does their daily life look like?
 - How can the two above be improved?
2. How can a network for social contact, enrichment and empowerment be established in this space?
 - What kind of activities do the women already do?
 - What kind of network is already existing and/or needed in the neighbourhood?
 - What could this space mean for the urban context?

3.1. Safe space

In order to find out what types of spaces feel safe to its future users, asking them is the most effective way. Therefore I will organise a workshop in Bressoux together with the social workers I met. Here I will give the word, the pencil and the camera to the people of the neighbourhood. In my architectural study on the results of the workshops I will focus on three pillars:

1. typology
2. composition
3. dimensions
4. material

I will let the women write down words that relate for them to a safe place in general and in the neighbourhood itself. They will also take photos with their cameras or phones of the places where they feel most comfortable. In addition they will be presented diverse images I made, to open discussions on safety. And lastly I will ask them to make a drawing or mood board representing their current daily life, and how it could be improved. Me and the social workers will do the same, to add extra perspectives, expertise and layers to the subject.

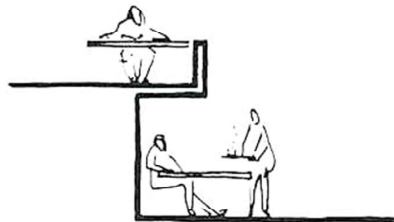
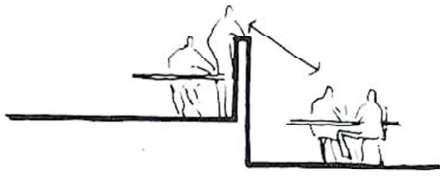
The position of women in the neighbourhood is not only a result of their own behaviour but also the result of how others see them. Therefore it would be interesting to also include men in the research. But to create a comfortable workshop I will do this study separately with interviews, since my experience with the men of Bressoux is that they are very vocal. Whereas with the women another method seemed necessary to start open discussions.

My speculation is that social control and constant occupation are fundamental to create a space that feels safe and personal. I am thinking of creating a co-housing concept for single mothers, their children and young girls, where social activities can be hosted. A mix of people who have a sense of ownership and new perspectives coming in and out might be a concept that facilitates safety and a network. With case studies, such as het Moederhuis (Aldo and Hannie van Eyck)², the RVS-flat (Wil Jansen)³ and Speefeld (BAR Architekten, FAT KOEHL Architekten)⁴, I will discover the possibilities of this concept. Another example that I will study is Herman Hertzberger's Montessorri School in Delft⁵, for which he used proportions based on the children's heights.

3.2. Social network

It is the people who make the neighbourhood, and the social workers who facilitate. But these organisations are dealing with a lack of space. With my research I want to find out how I could support a diverse range of activities for women. I will do a survey in the streets and organise a workshop to create discussions on what is needed.

Besides giving the word to the people of Bressoux and Droixhe, I will also study projects that have had a social impact with an architectural approach. For example in the Kitchenless City writer Anna Puigjaner⁶ described community kitchens in Peru that facilitate social and political visibility for women.



4. Products

Because Bressoux and Droixhe have a strong oral culture, I am thinking of creating a collage style graphic novel instead of a written text. With this medium I can combine the materials and results I gathered on site together with my personal case studies and literature findings. A visual presentation makes it more accessible for the people from the site. This way I can also give back.

Another medium that could possibly become part of my research is film. Explore Lab student Jonas Althuis is currently making a documentary on different approaches to design research. The registration of the conversations in the workshops and interviews could be a way to see how people behaved while making drawings, texts and photographs. It could add another layer of information and interpretation.

5. References

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Women at Le Festival de la Pomme, Inès van Rijn (2022)