# The City as a Stage Set

Msc 3 Urban Architecture Research / Sam Stalker 4830784
September 2019 - February 2020 / Anderlecht, Brussels, Belgium

**Prologue** *noun*
a speech often in verse addressed to the audience by an actor at the beginning of a play[1]

1 'Definition of PROLOGUE', accessed 10 February 2020, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prologue.

The following research is a collection of approaches investigating the notion of the city as a stage set, with the perpective of the architect adapting to the perpective of a director. This change of focus, from built form to performance, aims to explore the question;

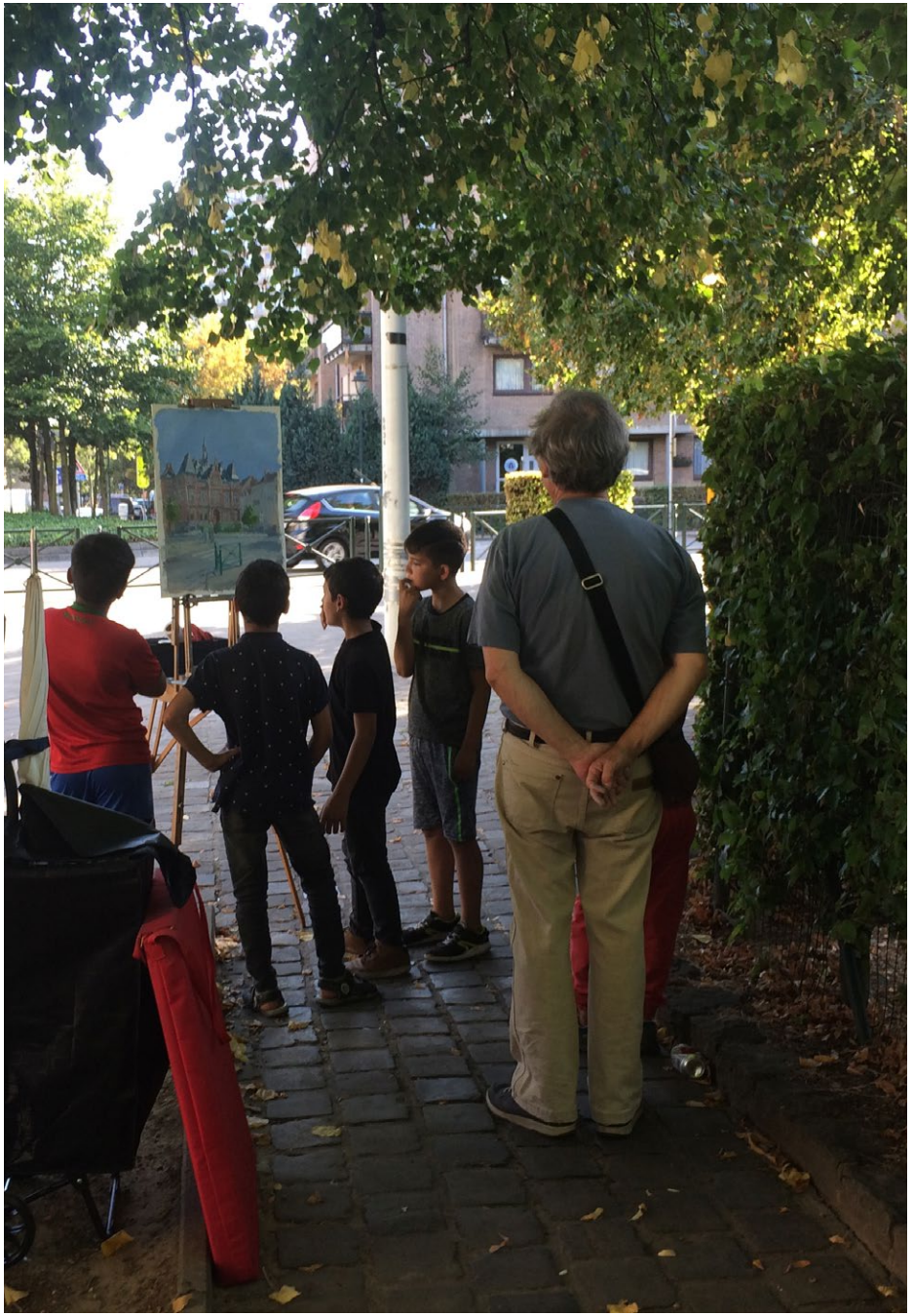
‘How do the characters of Anderlecht engage with the scenes they inhabitat?’

The site will be addressed as Scenery, Stage Set, Script,Performance and Denouement. This terminology, more tradionally associated with the film and theatre industry, is to be used to concieve of people and place as one engaged entity, as viewed when watching a film or theatre production.

**Scenery** *noun*
the painted scenes or hangings and accessories used on a theater stage / one's usual surroundings[1]

1 'Definition of SCENERY', accessed 10 February 2020, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/scenery.

The location is Anderlecht, a municipality on the south-west of the city centre of Brussels. Anderlecht is a bricolage: something that is constructed or created from a diverse range of things. This is evident in both in the physical construction and the social community of Anderlecht.



Physically, the neighbourhood is a collage of typologies of different purposes and of different ages. The urban blocks typically are formed with a perimeter of 19th century brick terraced housing, with a grown amalgamation of industrial spaces encompassing the inner voids within. This boundary between living and working in blurred,  as the purposes, inhabitants and forms overlap as they have evolved over time. The site of analysis in these can be viewed as six different scenes that together complete the sites scenery.

Scene one is composed of the remaining corner plots of the brick perimeter housing with a large steel structure warehouse behind. Traces of the previous housing is still present of on the party wall. The cladding of the warehouse runs onto the brickwork elevation.

For scene two, fragments of the brick perimeter housing remain with various industrial units built behind. Various signs of an evolved urban form are present with the voids left in the block. Front entrances have been modified to allow for industrial logistics to penetrate the perimeter.

Scene three comprises of a late 20th century brick housing block to the north of the site. The block stands isolated from the neighbouring buildings, with a smaller block adjoining onto the perimeter housing.

Scene four, dominating in stature, is a nineteen storey social housing block omnipresent on the site, towering over the surrounding buildings. Repetitive in detail but articulated with appropiated purposes by its inhabitants. A small, single storey restaurant sits in front of the block, blending into the landscape.

Scene five is an amalgamation of industrial and house units sit to the south of the site, varying in materiality and form. The plots are mostly vacant and some have already been demolished.

Then scene six is the park on the site, bound by the street and the back of the industrial units adjoining the portion of perimeter housing that remains. The ground plane is a manipulated topography and the trees are similar in size and species.

‘As Found’ is a perceptive recognition of reality, “... a new seeing of the ordinary, an openness as to how prosaic ‘things’ could re-energise our inventive activity.” Alison and Peter Smithson discuss an approach towards an everyday architecture with their contribution to the book ‘As Found: The Discovery of the Ordinary’. The philosophy of ‘As Found’ has to do with attentiveness, with concern for that which exists, with a passion for the task of making something from something. It is a technique of reaction. The careful analysis of the existing, or for the purposes of this research the scenery, gives a value to each characteristic of the site that could otherwise be overlooked. These characteristics instead become something to cherish, presenting the richness that existing when you simply stop and look.[1]

The film producer Karel Reisz has said, looking back on his work, “It is about wanting what you got, rather than going out and getting what you want.”[2]

1 D. Robbins, The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990), 40.

2 Claude Lichtenstein and Thomas Schregenberger, As Found: The Discovery of the Ordinary British Architecture and Art of the 1950s: Independent Group and New Brutalism (Baden/Schw: Lars Muller Publishers, 2001), 10.

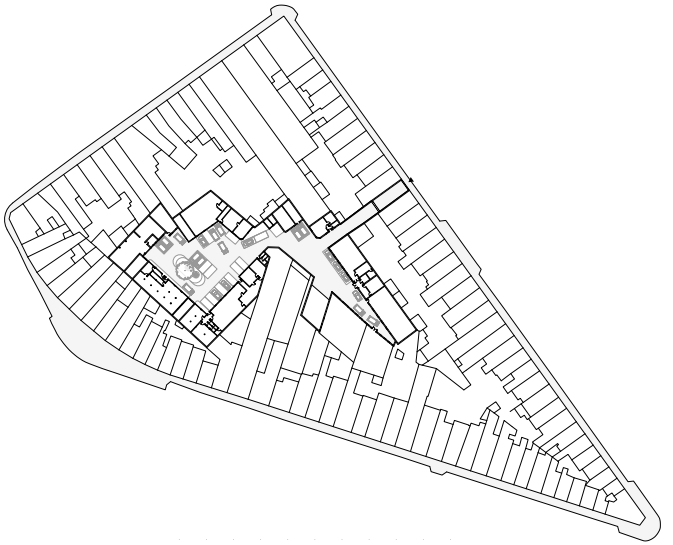
Socially, the community is diverse with layered cultural and historical stories. Labour migrants from the early 20th century from southern and eastern europe, a middle class exodus from 1970 to 1990 to the suburbs of Brussels, an introduction of highly educated migrants due to economical prosperity in the early 2000's and the continuing increase of war migrants from Yugoslavia, Africa, Eastern Europe all begin to tell the tale of the characters that set a scene within Anderlecht.

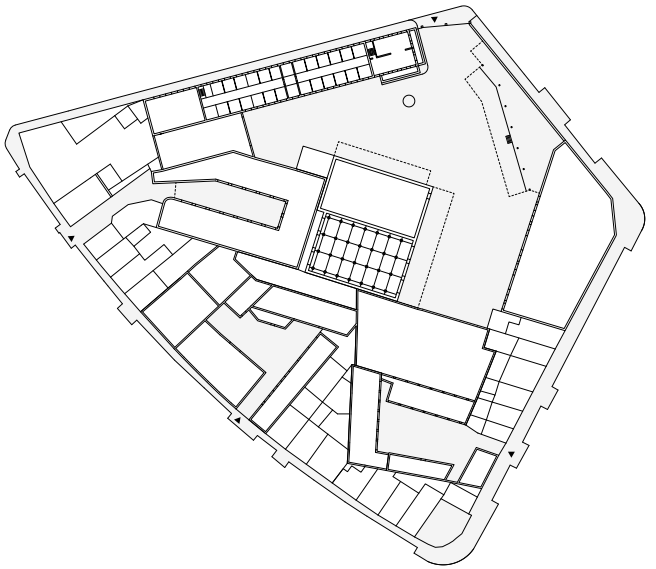
To depict this physical and social bricolage, an ethnographic research methodology was conducted through a means of active and thorough observations. Through in-depth interactions, interviews and film recording of the site specific settings, there was an access gained to people's lives and daily routines, formulating an understanding to the engagements with the context they inhabit. This intrigue of engagement formulated the basis of the research question; 'How do the characters of Anderlecht engage with the scenes they inhabitat?'

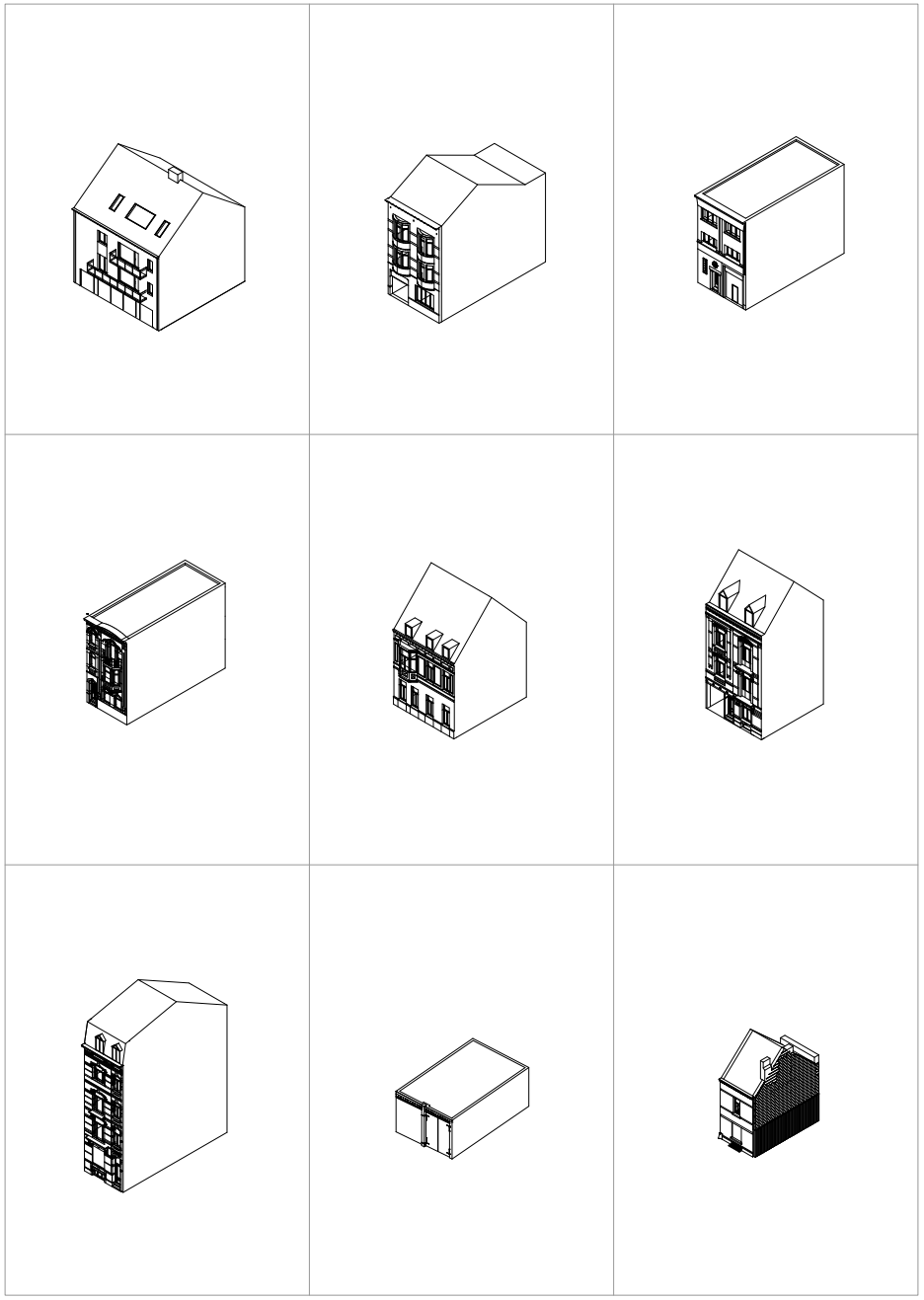
**Stage Set** *noun*
scenery and properties designed and arranged for a particular scene in a play[1]

1 'Definition of STAGE SET', accessed 10 February 2020, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stageset.

The urban blocks of Anderlecht can be read as a front stage and back stage, and vice versa, dependant on the charcters telling the story. Typically, the outer perimeter of the housing along the street could be classed as the front stage, with the industry embedded inside forming the back stage. However if that industry becomes the point of focus to the film and audience, the perimeter housing becomes the back stage to the front stage industry. These two entities are engaging in a constant dialogue with one another and both rely on each other to exist.



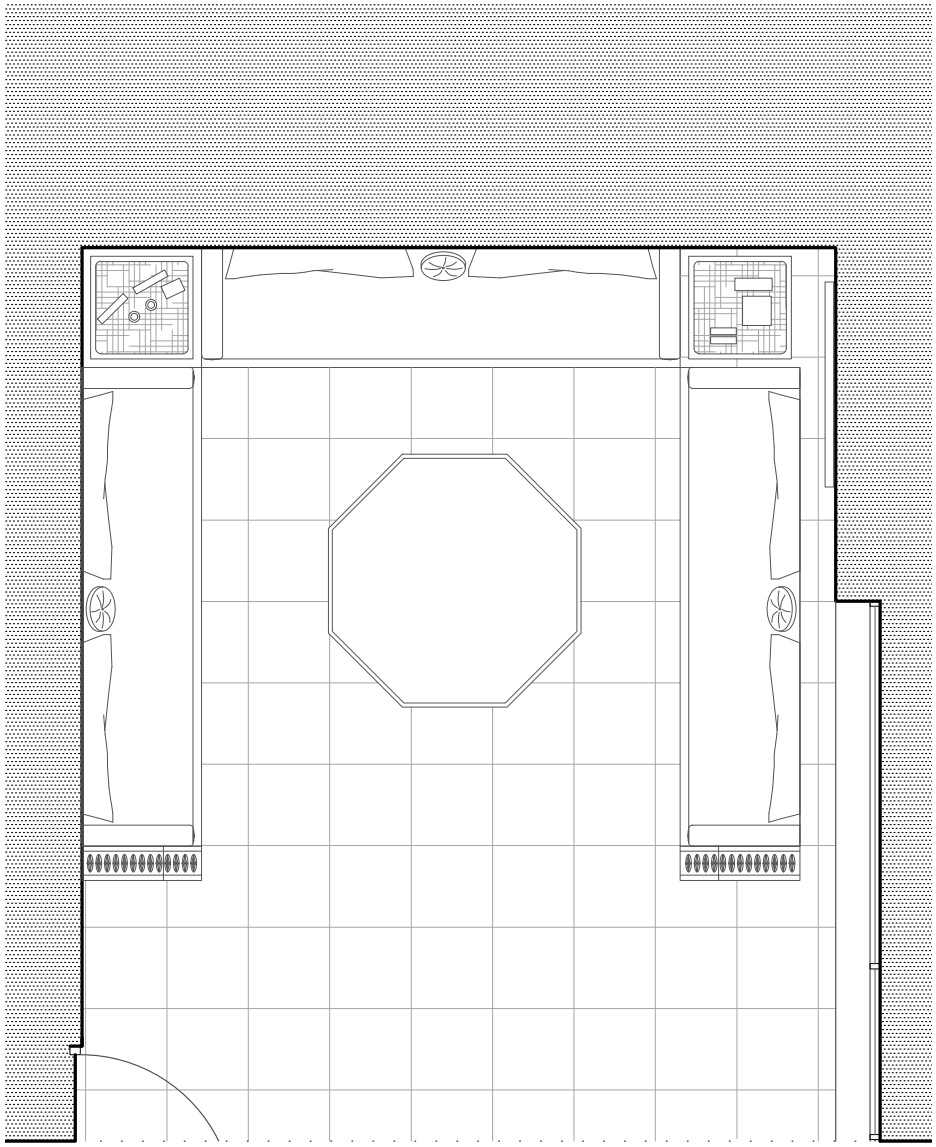




This dialogue presents the buildings themselves as characters engaging with one another. Each scene and character can be read indivually or as knitted together into the series of rooms that make up Anderlecht.
The order in which they are read defines who the neighbourood is at that given moment, highlighting the multitude of answers to the given question. The scenes filmed become the sets, the people observed become the characters. However through this observation the reverse was also true, the scenes could also be perceived as our characters and the people themselves as the set. Each room, along with each person, has a story to tell.

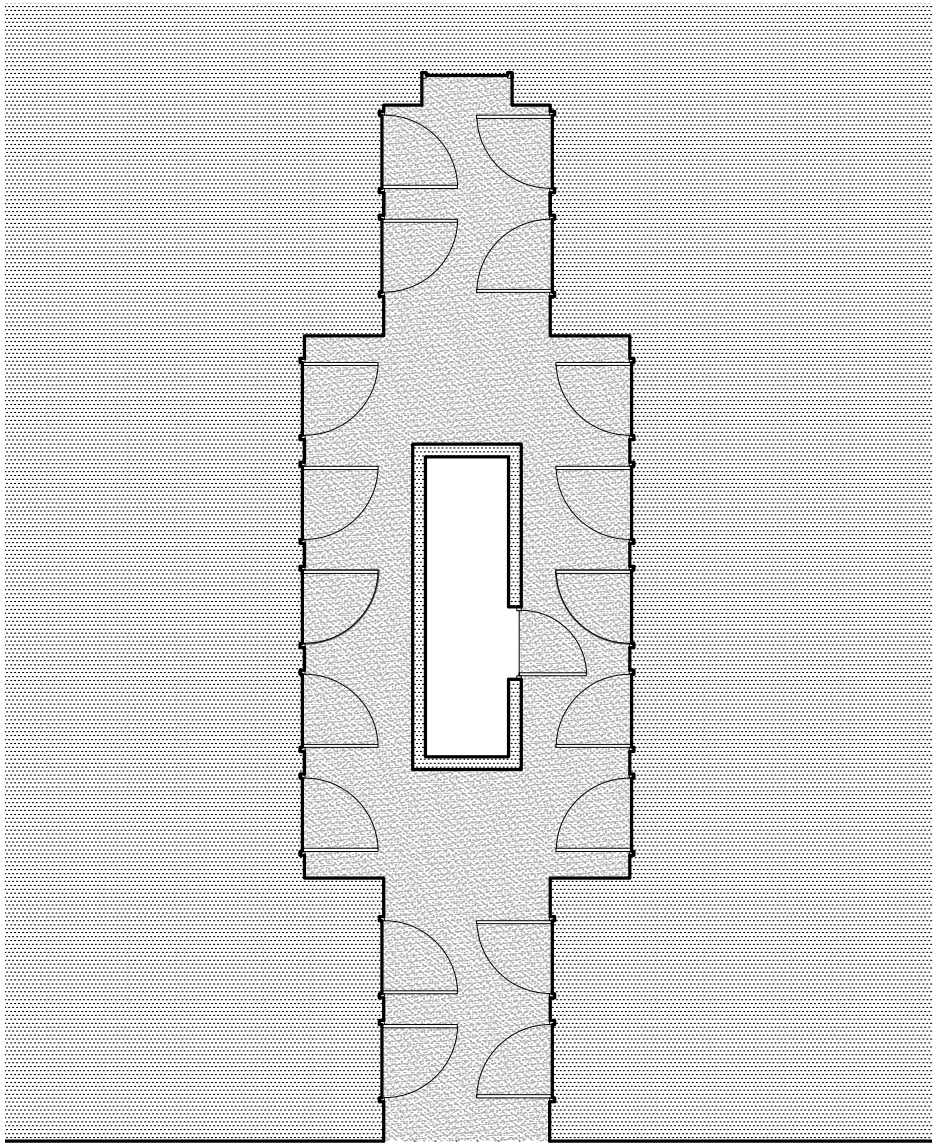
Through filming, certain themes of Anderlecht began to be uncovered. An intrigue to spaces, revealing themselves as a series of rooms, would constantly surprise as you delve deeper into the urban block. A collection of construction trades, an international set of dancers and a community of artists in residence were all discovered within the blocks, each with a set of characters with their own particular story. This element of surprise and intrigue told something of how the neighbourhood had developed, and there was an irony and comical value to it's formulation from the maximum densification of space and built form, revealing the multitude of lives all living within a close proximity to one another that would not always be expected. Analysing Anderlecht in this way saw the neighbourhood as a stage set, with the engagements of peoples daily routines formulating the performance of everyday life, the spatial acting out of place.

Analysis this series of rooms as a series of characters begins to give the value to the ordinary and banal of the scene, with each detail and characteristic telling history and uniqueness to the spaces personality. These embedded value is reminiscent of the attitudes presented by The Smithsons in 'As Found'. The following pages show a series of drawings representing each characters personality.



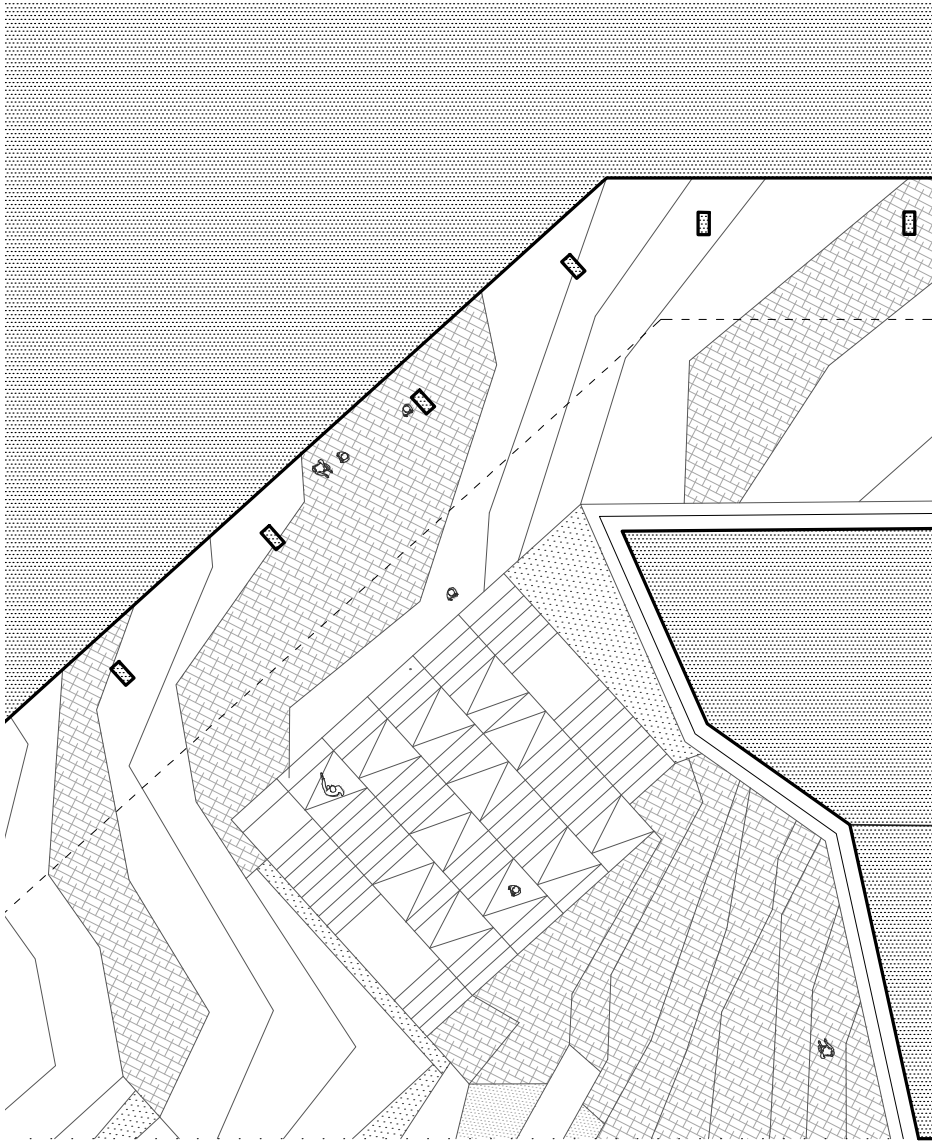
1m

*"If there would be more place - that would be better. If there was another room for my brother, it will be better, but apart from that it is good. But I prefer to live in a house, not an apartment. You are not with other people, it is your house, you can do what you want. It is better I think."*



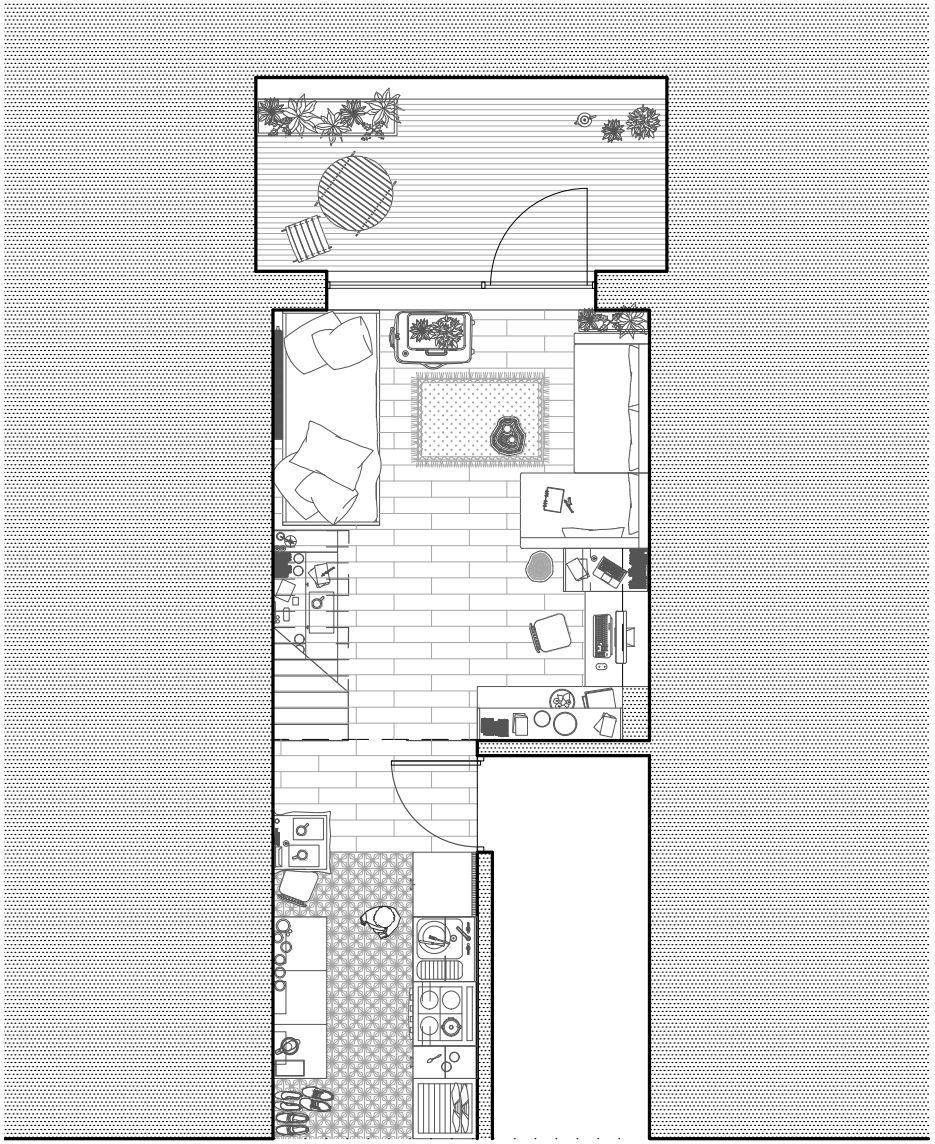
1m

*"I have been living here for 18 years now. Since I was 3. I like how lively the building is, there is always something going on, it is never boring, it is not quiet. And I'm used to this, so yes, that's what I like. [Is there anything you don't like?] I don't like noisy people. Some live here. There is something bad going on here. There are a lot of kids doing things they shouldn't be doing."*



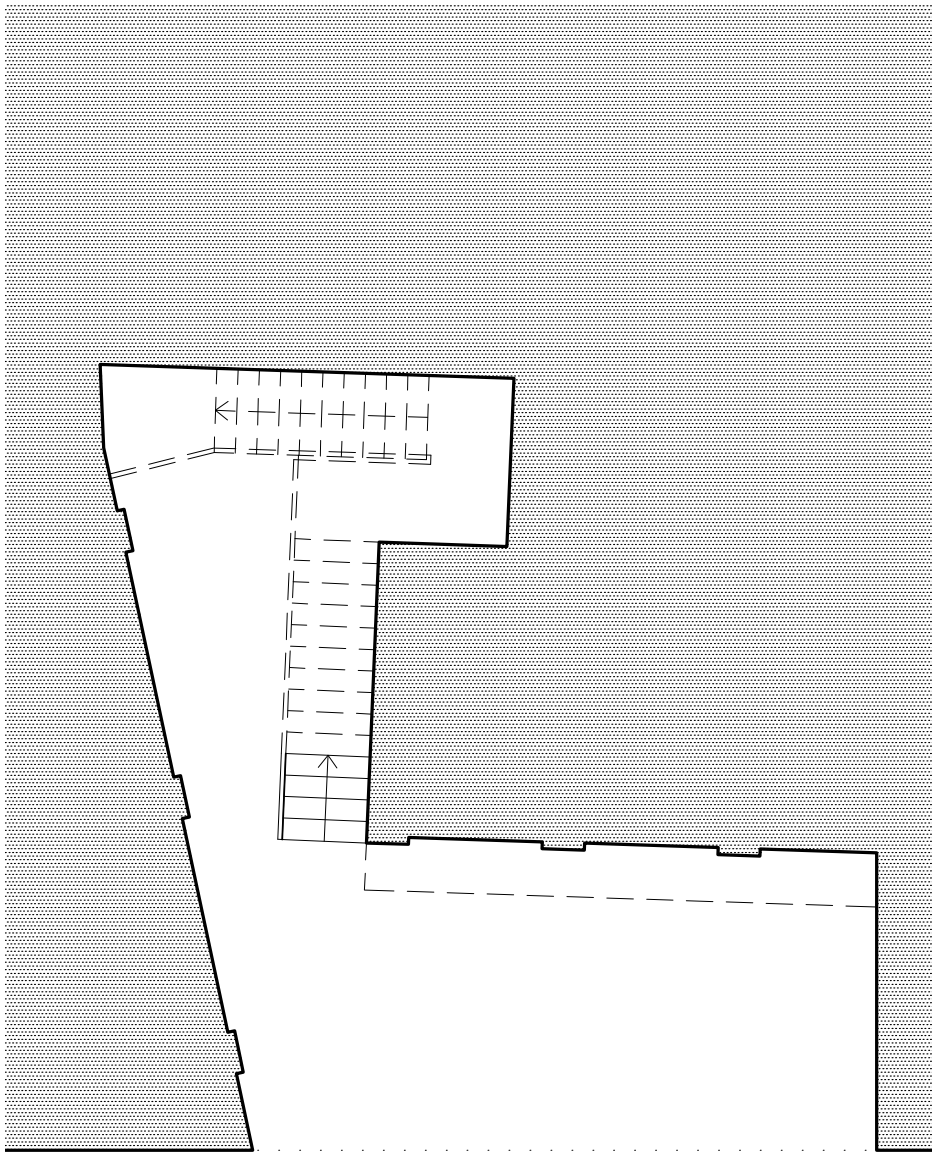
1m

*"What's good about here is that everything is next to you. You can find a lot of markets, so it is good facilities. [Do you do anything here, in the area? Do you go out here, shop here?] No, not really. With my friends we go to the cinema, and it's not here. It is in the city. [Is there anything missing in here?] No, I don't think so. It is good. For me it's good."*



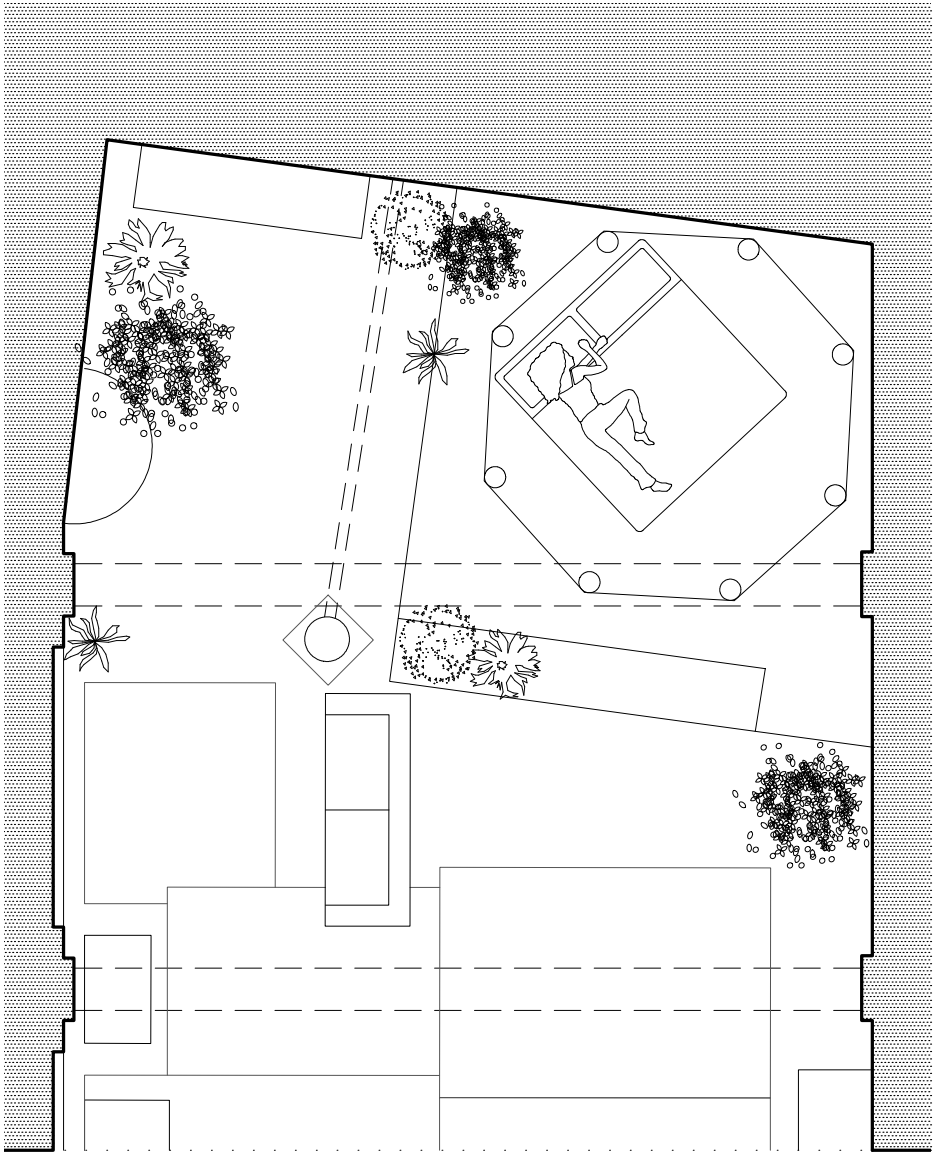
1m

*"I've been living here 2 or 3 years. I moved because my girlfriend is living here and we decided to live together. And I changed my address, because I had a problem with Flemish government. It was hard, because I don't speak Flemish. For administrative reasons it was too complicated to stay. I legalized the situation for language situation."*



1m

*a staircase that presents itself only to people who look*

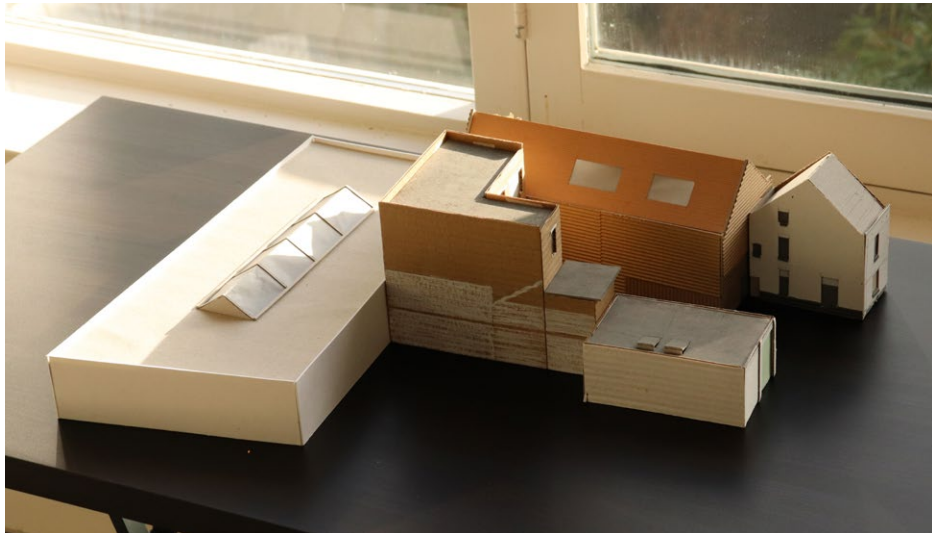


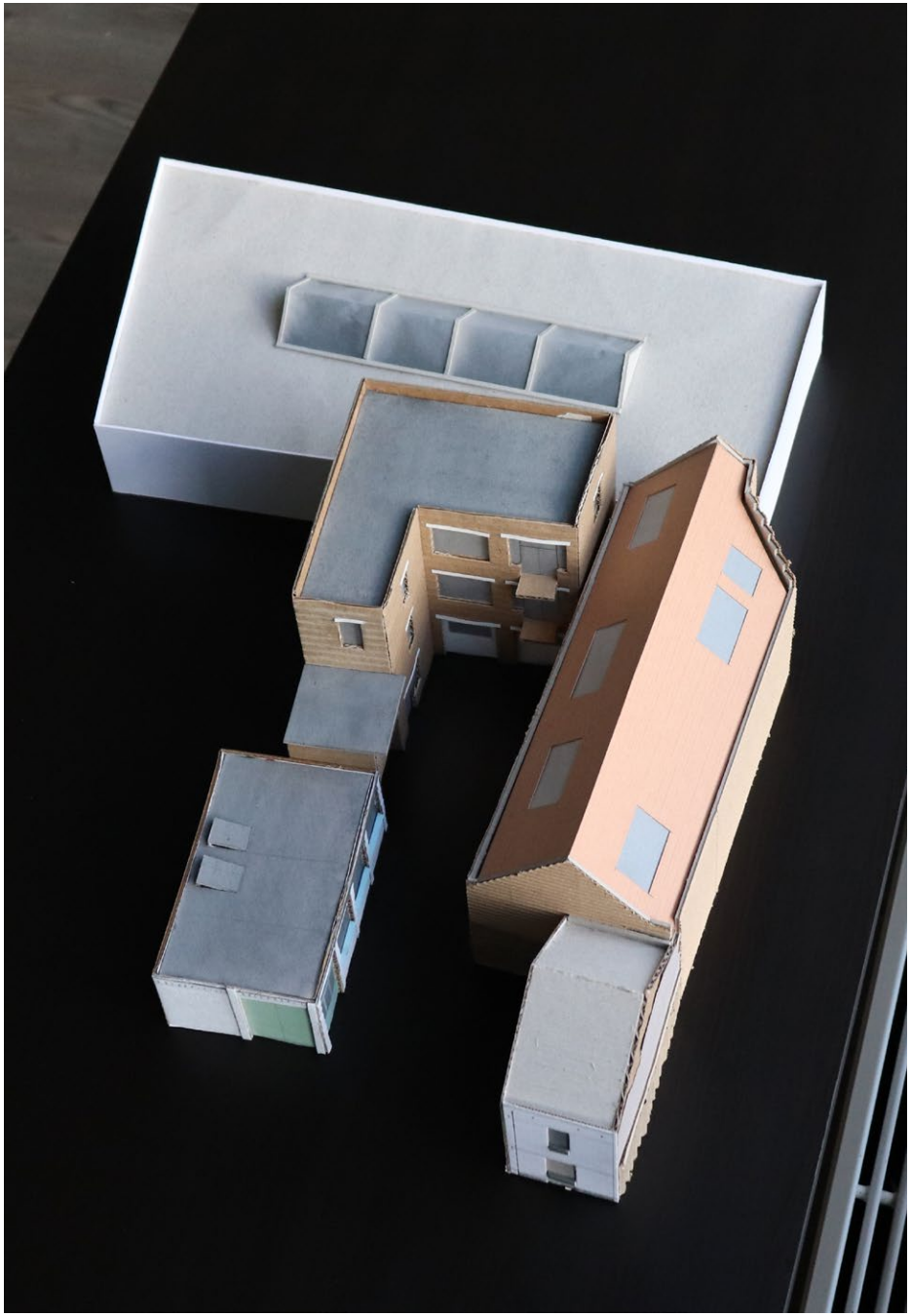
1m

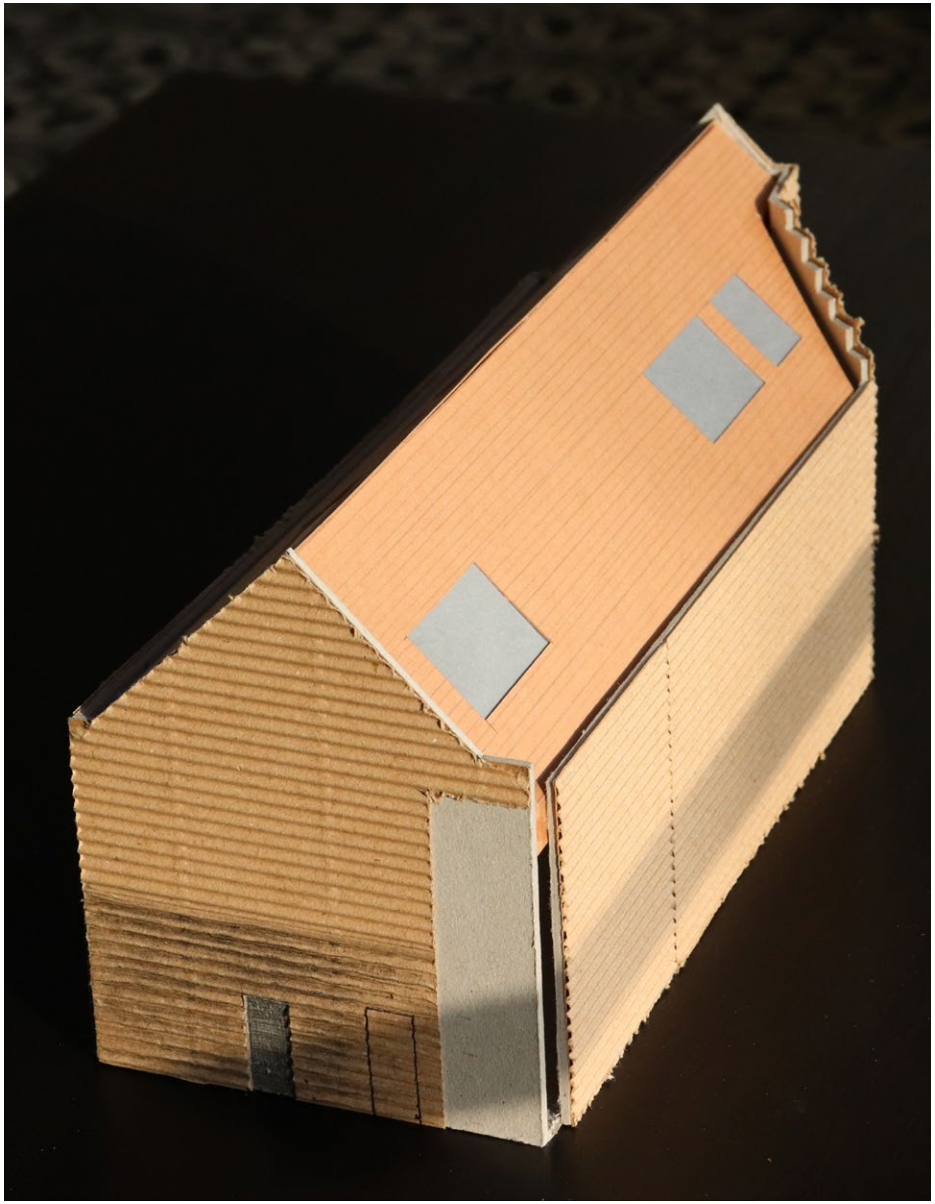
*"I thought of a way to do a double glazed window in a cheap way"*

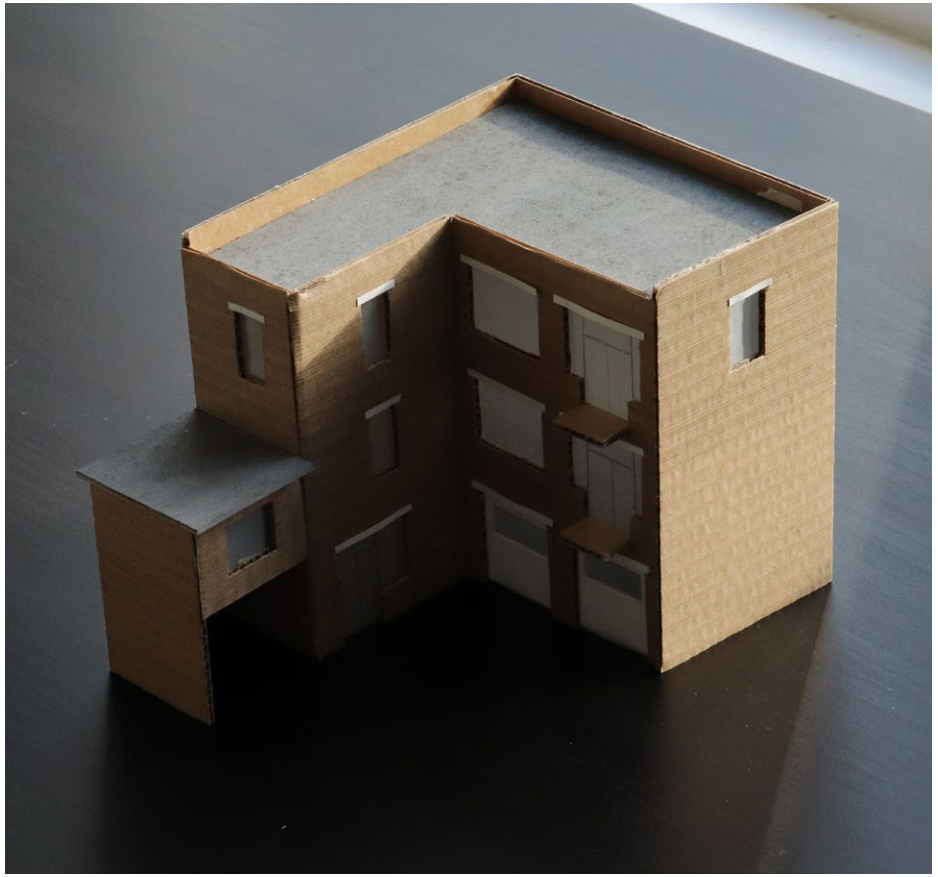
It's at this point where the theme of 'spolia' becomes relevant, an archaelogical concept where a building component such as stone is taken out and repurposed with a new function. Through a thorough analysis of the existing, the existing elements of the site are to be negiotied with, understanding their values and how they can be redefined to benefit the needs of the present.

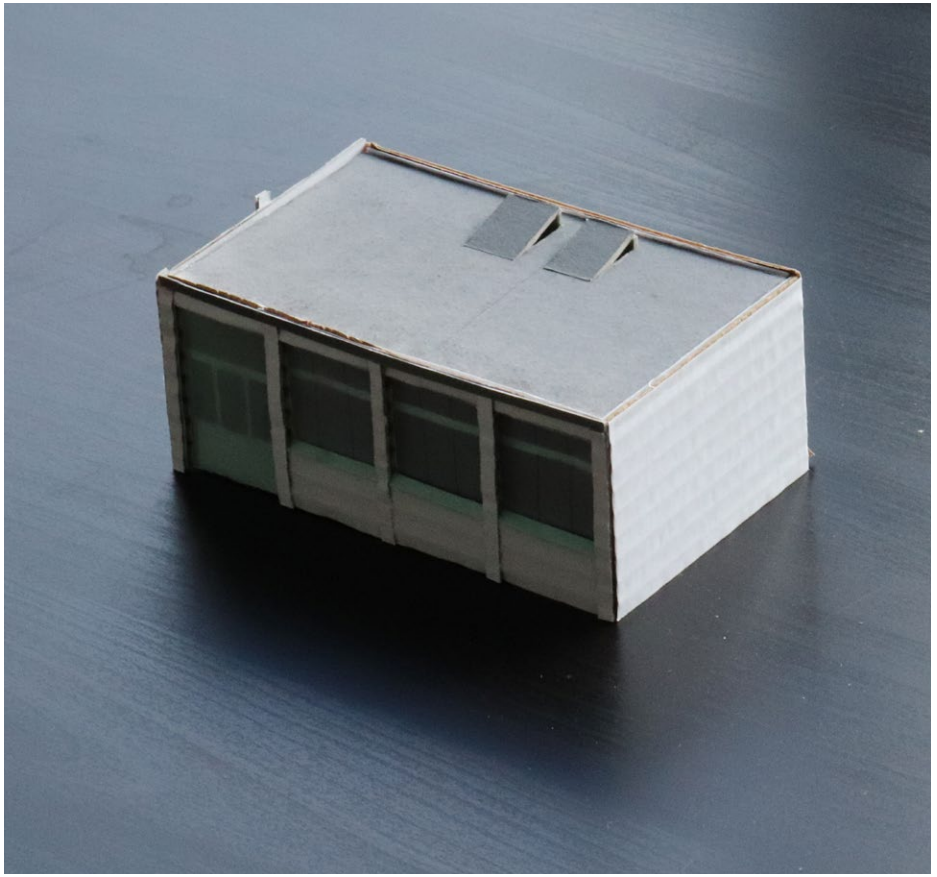
To understand and give care to these negotiations, the detailed observations are to be transposed into 3D models, giving life to the stage set and creating the first part of the dialogue to be conversed and 'perform' with. The character models are built at 1:100, constructed of scrap material to adopt the As Found principles address earlier. The collages of material and form represent that of the site, an evolved palette that has grown over years, a characterful, rich mixture.







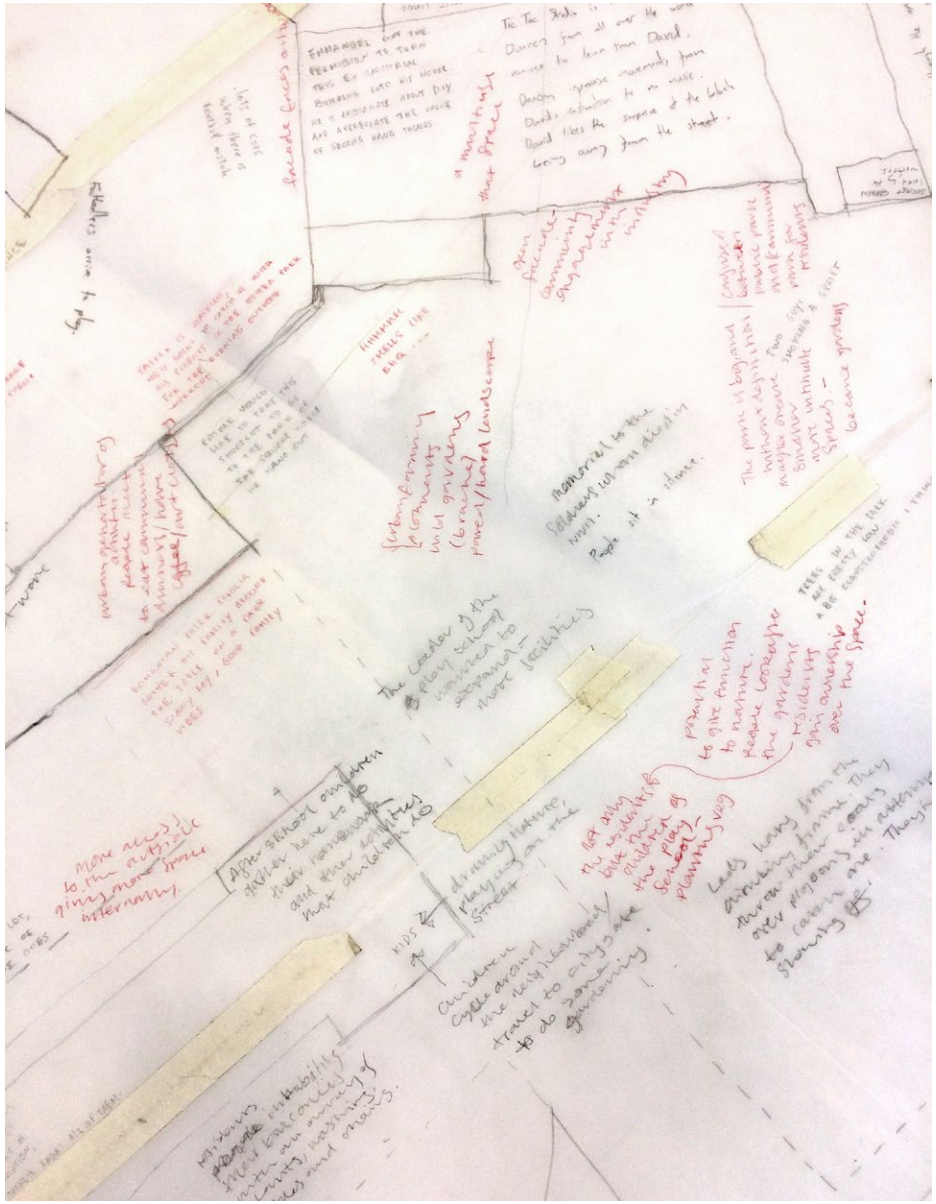


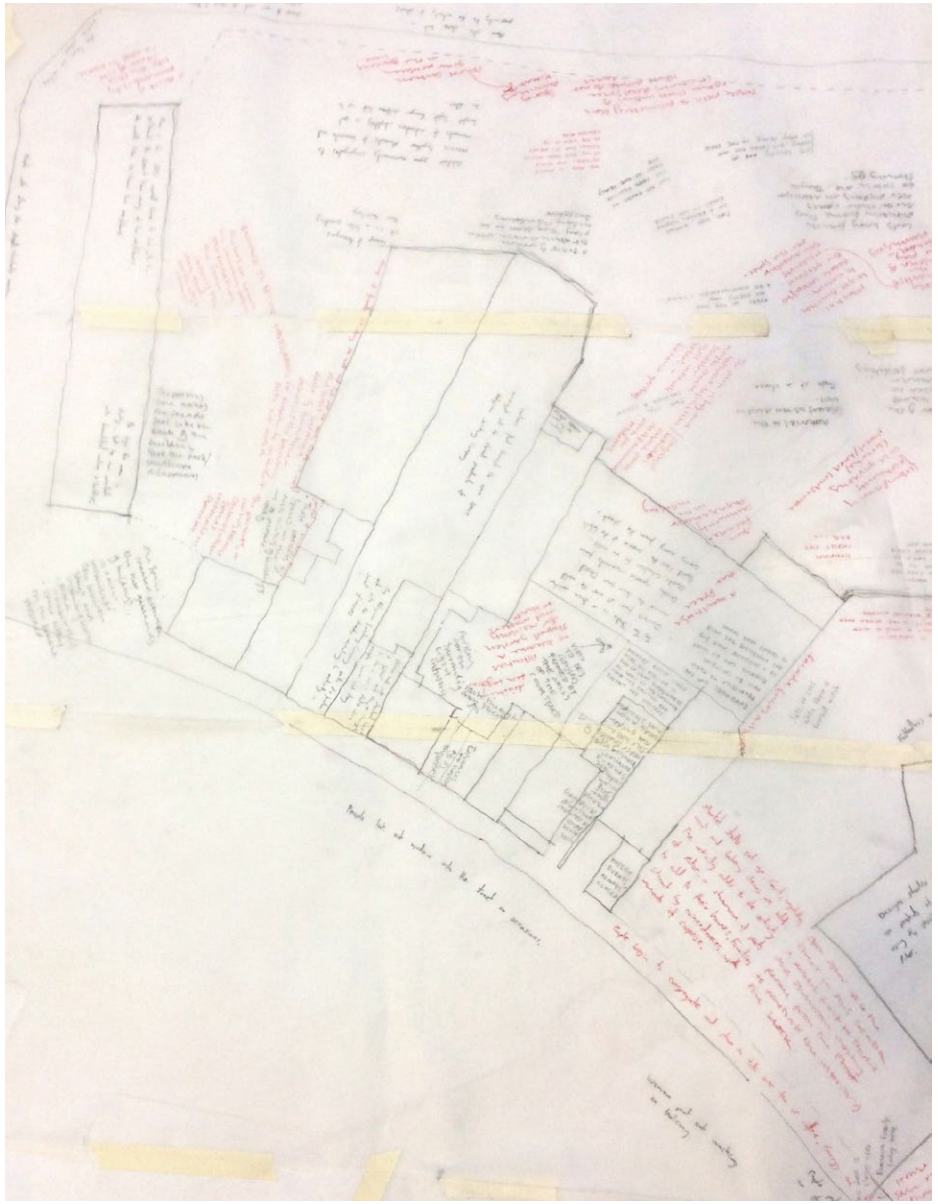


**Script** *noun*
the written text of a stage play, screenplay, or broadcast
specifically : the one used in production or performance[1]

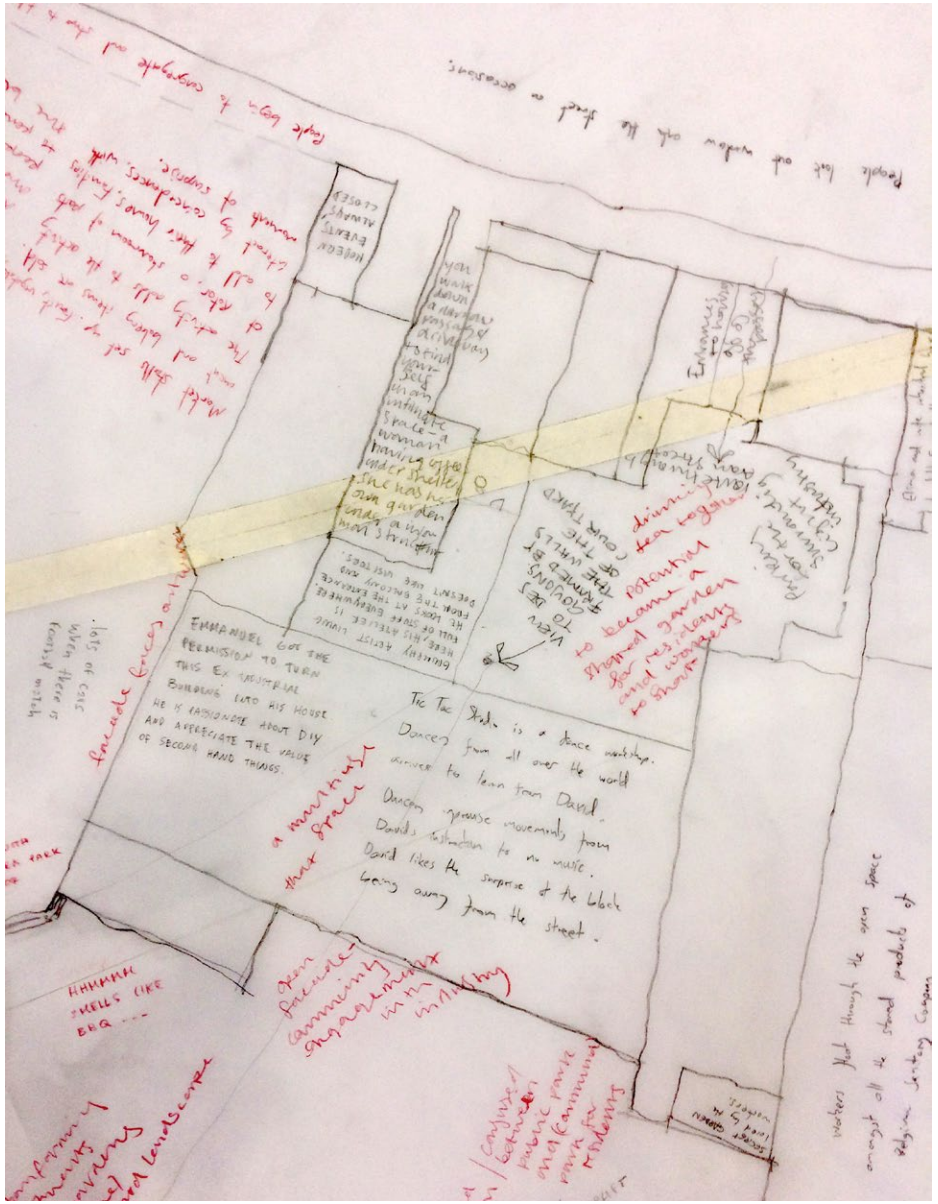
1 'Definition of SCRIPT', accessed 10 February 2020, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/script.

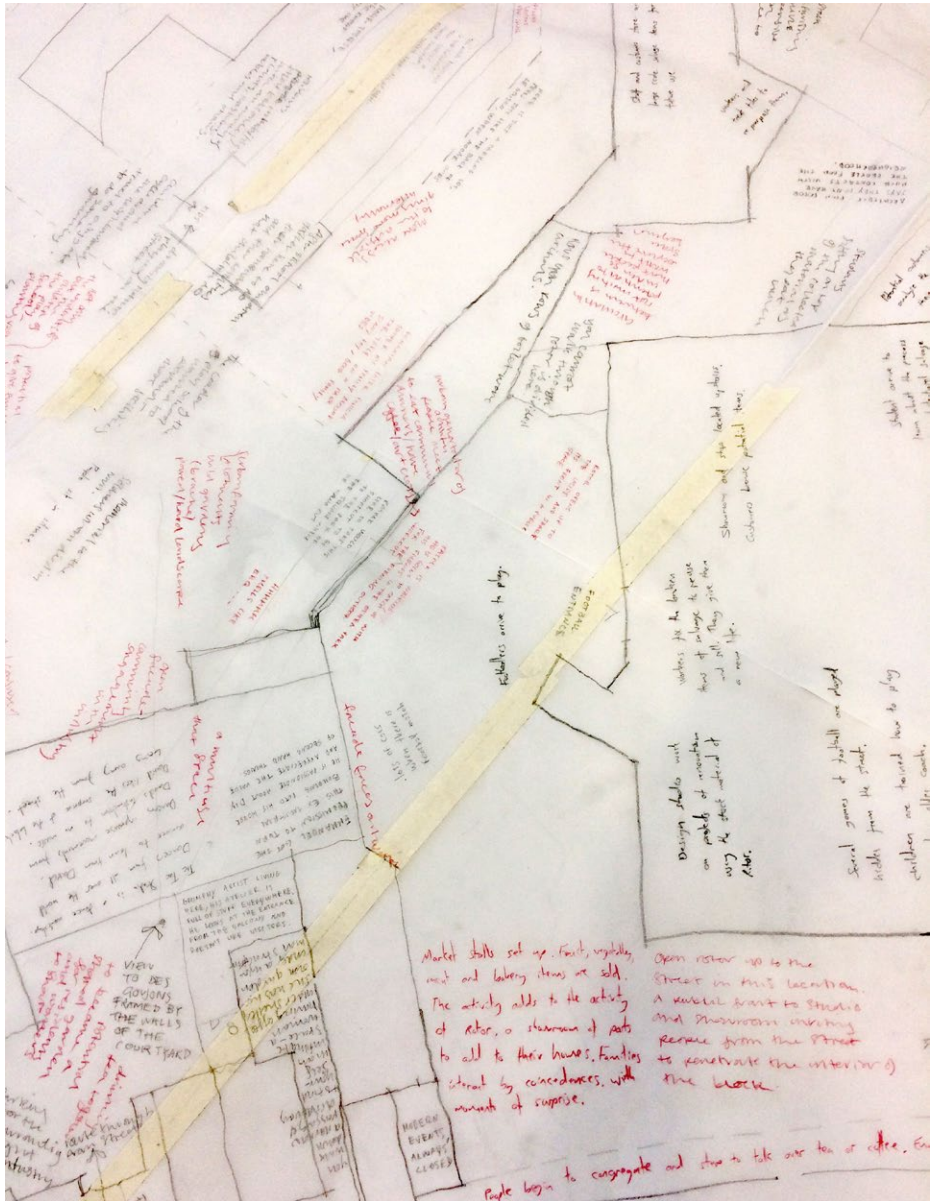
Interviews were conducted throughout the site, gaining an insight to the first hand accounts spoken through the neighbourhood. Transcriped at a large scale, a zoomed in approach to these discussions would allow for immediate responses to the evolved dialogues of everything existing. Venturi and Scott-Brown stated that ‘the most revolutionary thing an architect can do is to stop and look’. By zooming in, we stop and look everything, the banal, the ordinary, the everyday, and start to conceive of the value it holds.





With people as a focus, the findings of the interviews that were conducted became the script, positioned onto the plan at the points spoken giving context and a placement to the discussions. With the approaches, demolition is kept to a minimal. Instead the existing discussions are to be complemented, expressing their uniqueness of use and form, giving richness to the dialogues between the past and the present.


People look out window onto the street on occasions.
EMMANUEL GOT THE PERMISSION TO TURN THIS EX INDUSTRIAL BUILDING INTO HIS HOUSE HE IS PASSIONATE ABOUT DIY AND APPRECIATE THE VALUE OF SECOND HAND THINGS.
Tic Tac Studio is a dance workshop. Dancers from all over the world arrived to learn from David. Dancers improvise movements from David's instruction to no music. David likes the surprise of the block being away from the street.
a multiple that space
facade faces outwards
HHMMMM SMELLS LIKE BBQ ...
open facade - community engagement in the industry
Workers float through the open space amongst all the stored products of Belgian Sanitary Company
Market stalls set up. Fruit, vegetables, meat and bakery items are sold. The activity adds to the activity of Rotor, a showroom of parts to add to their houses. Families interact by coincidences, with moments of surprise.
Open rotor up to the street in this location. A public front to studio and showroom inviting people from the street to penetrate the interior of the block.
People begin to congregate and stop to talk over tea or coffee.
Folkloters arrive to play.
Design studio with on pockets of innovation using the stock material of Rotor.
Social games of football are played widdin from the street.
Children are trained how to play
HOBERN EVENTS ALWAYS CLOSED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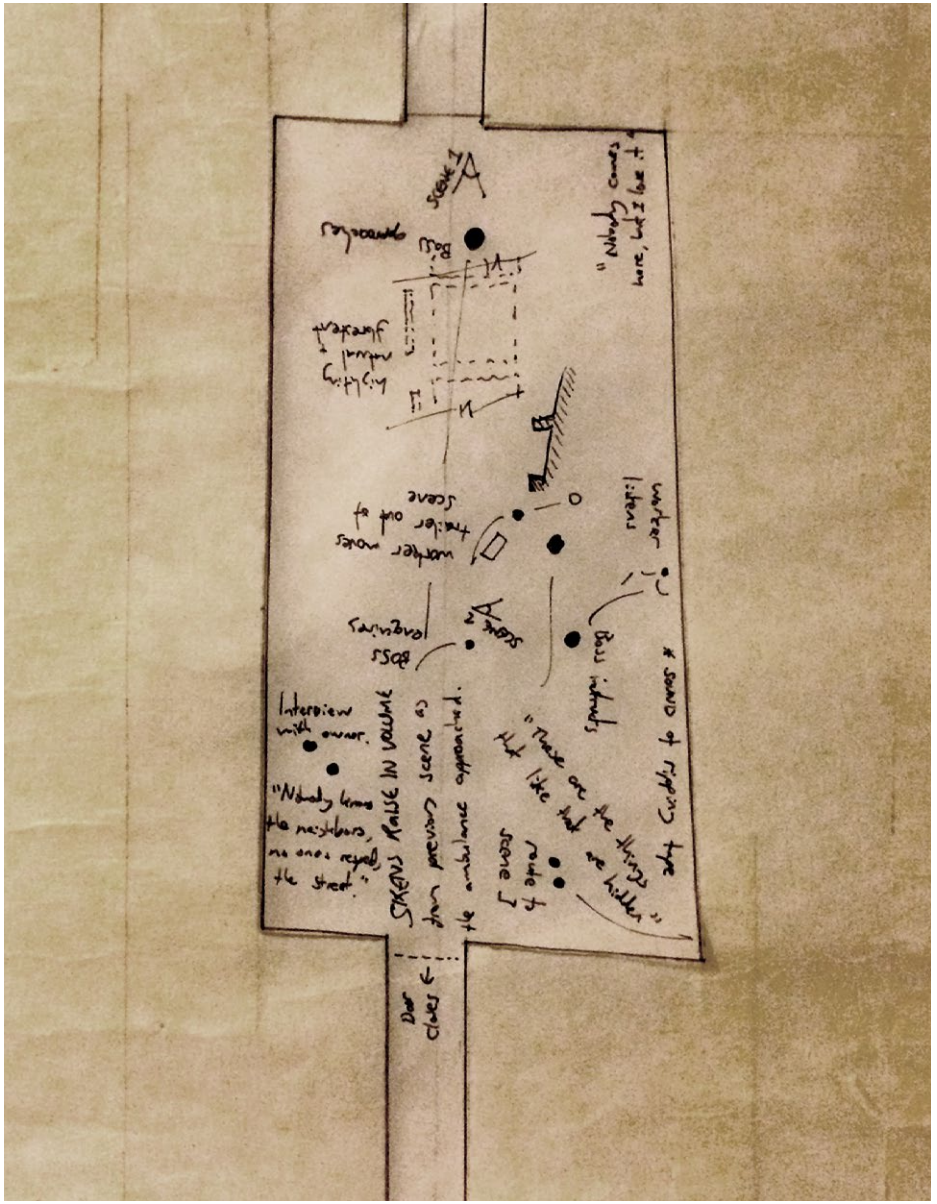
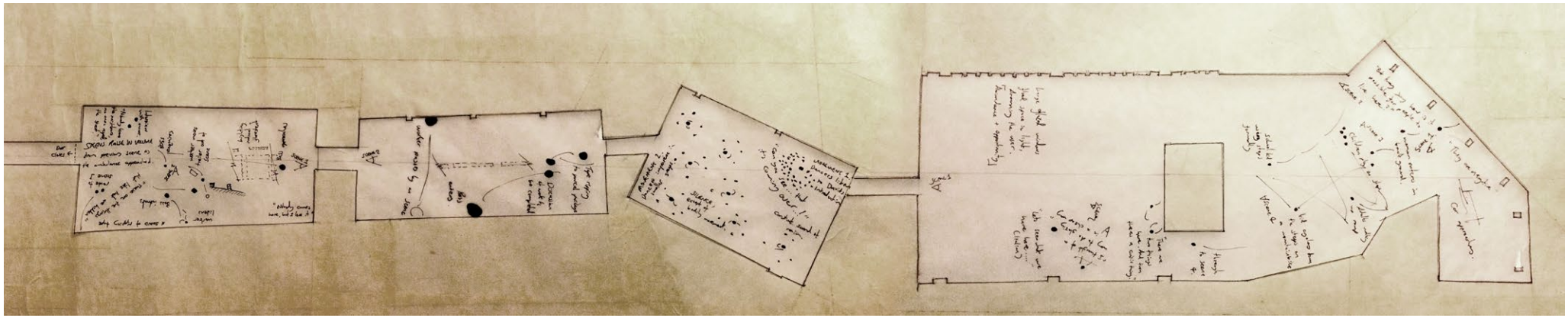
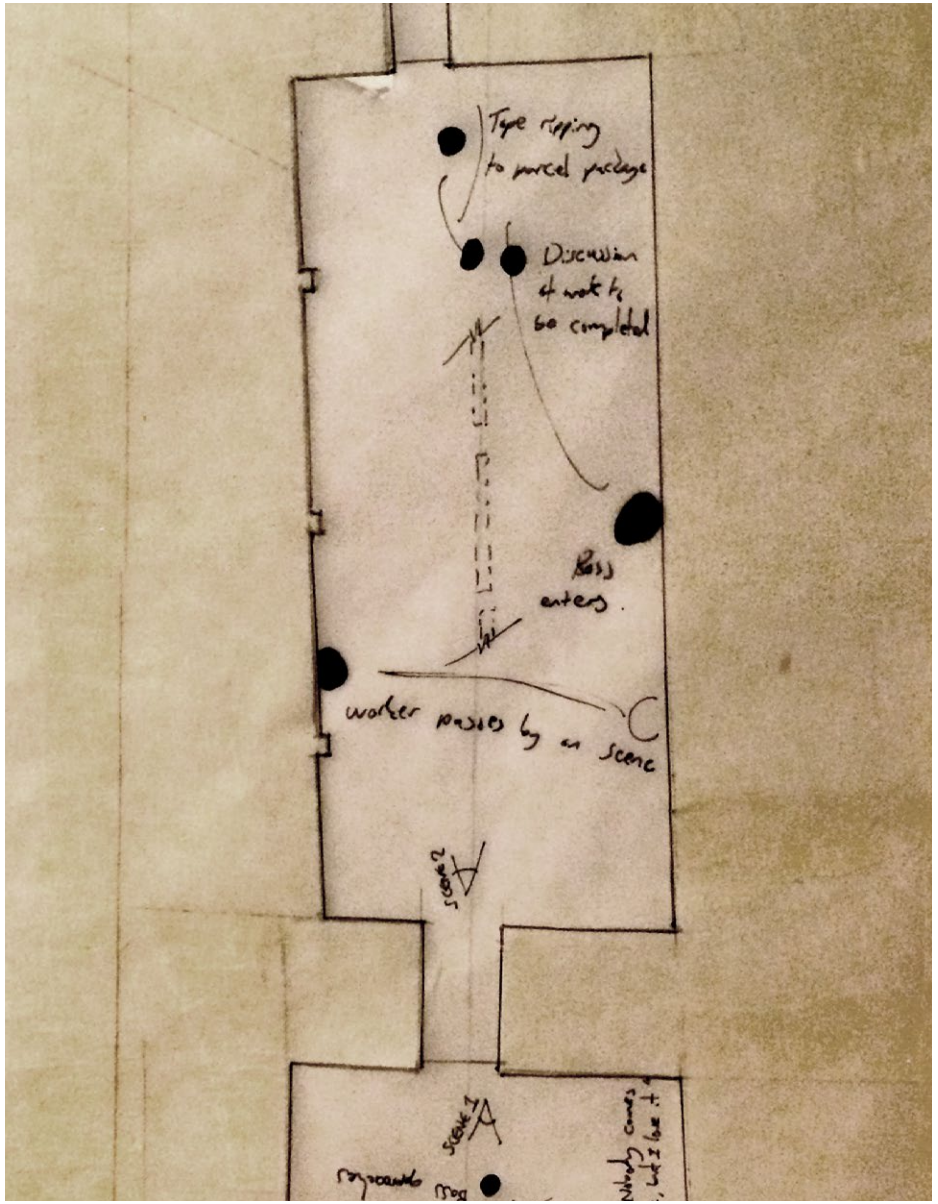
facade faces outwards
a multiple that space
VIEW TO DES GOUJONS FRAMED BY THE WALLS OF THE COUR TRAKD
HOBERN EVENTS ALWAYS CLOSED

These scripted discussions can also be cut to the sequencing that the spaces were discovered. As spaces were being observed from film analysis, room after room would reveal itself through the engagements and discussions completed with people and space. Notating these everyday engaging which were captured on film, the notational drawing begin to resemble drawings of dance choreography, where movement, signals, timing and cues begin to bound the extremities of space.

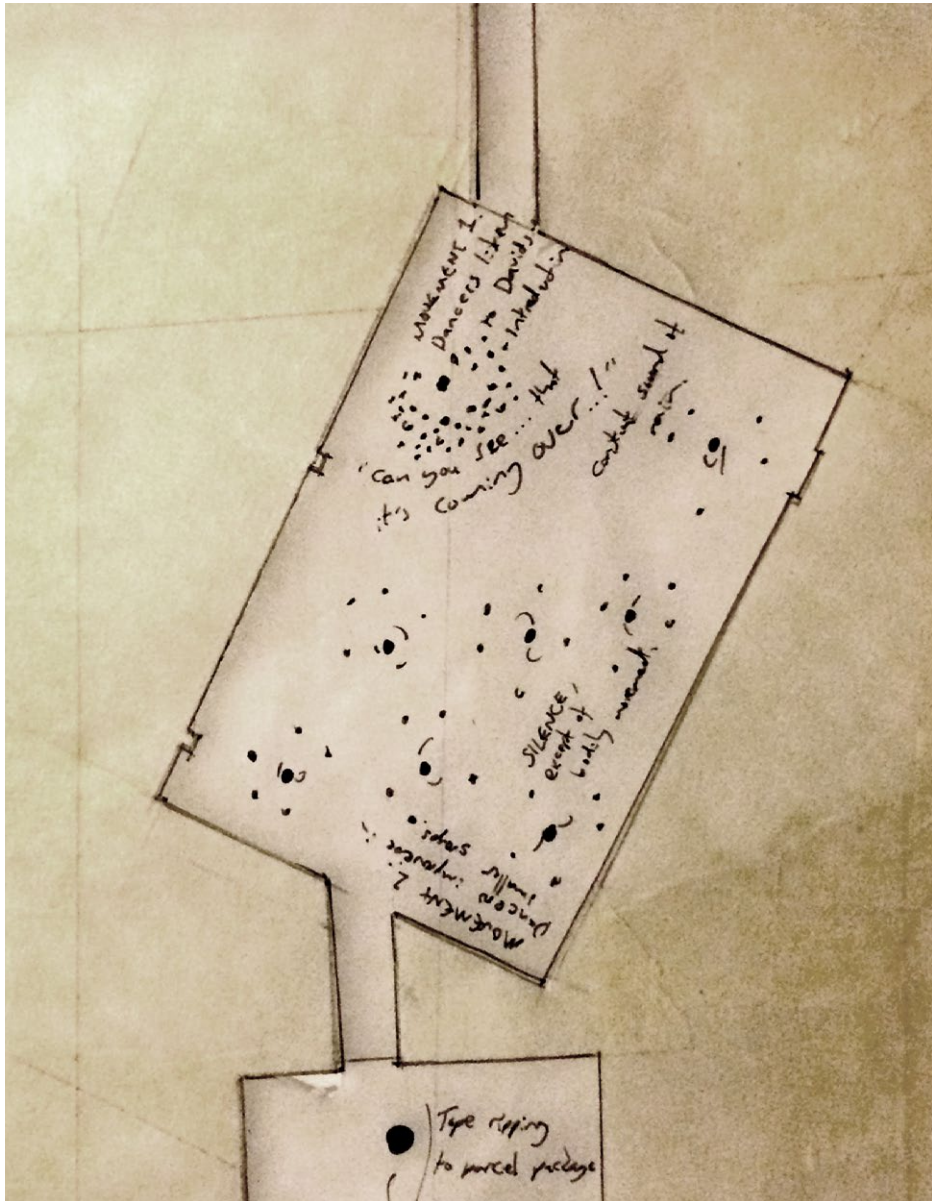


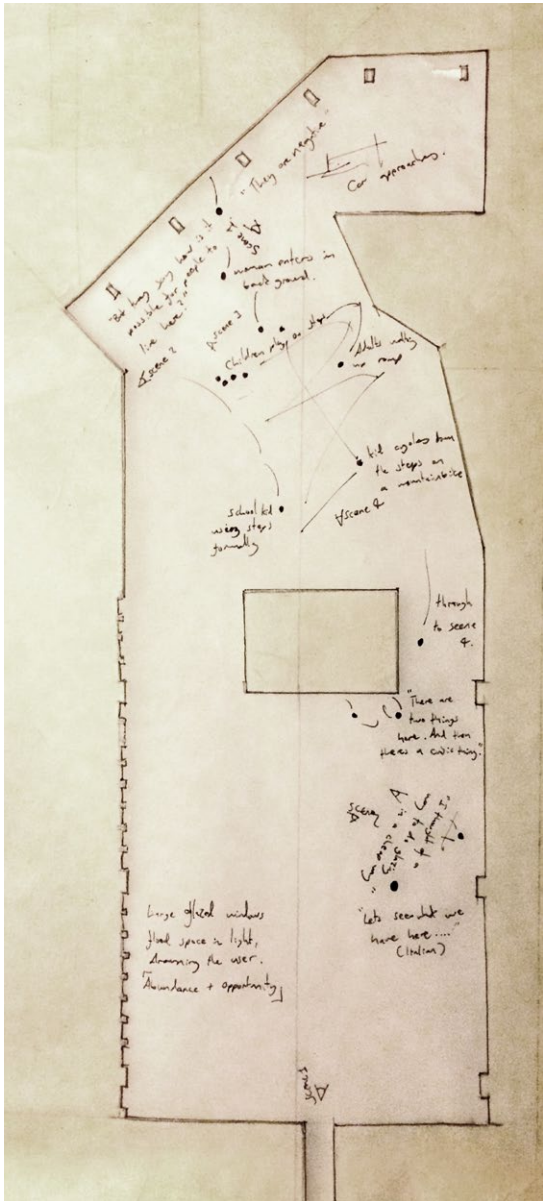





Every architectural plan is a stylised objectification of space. No inhabitant will ever see or experience the building drawn in this way. The inhabited, visited, walked through, and experienced space reshapes into the course of a film, into a constantly changing conglomerate of lines, inclined surfaces, perspective bundles and eddies of perspective, of overlays and rushings, of opinions, feelings, memories.[1]

1 Hans Dieter Schaal, Innenraeume Interior Spaces (Berlin: Wiley VCH, 1995), 29.

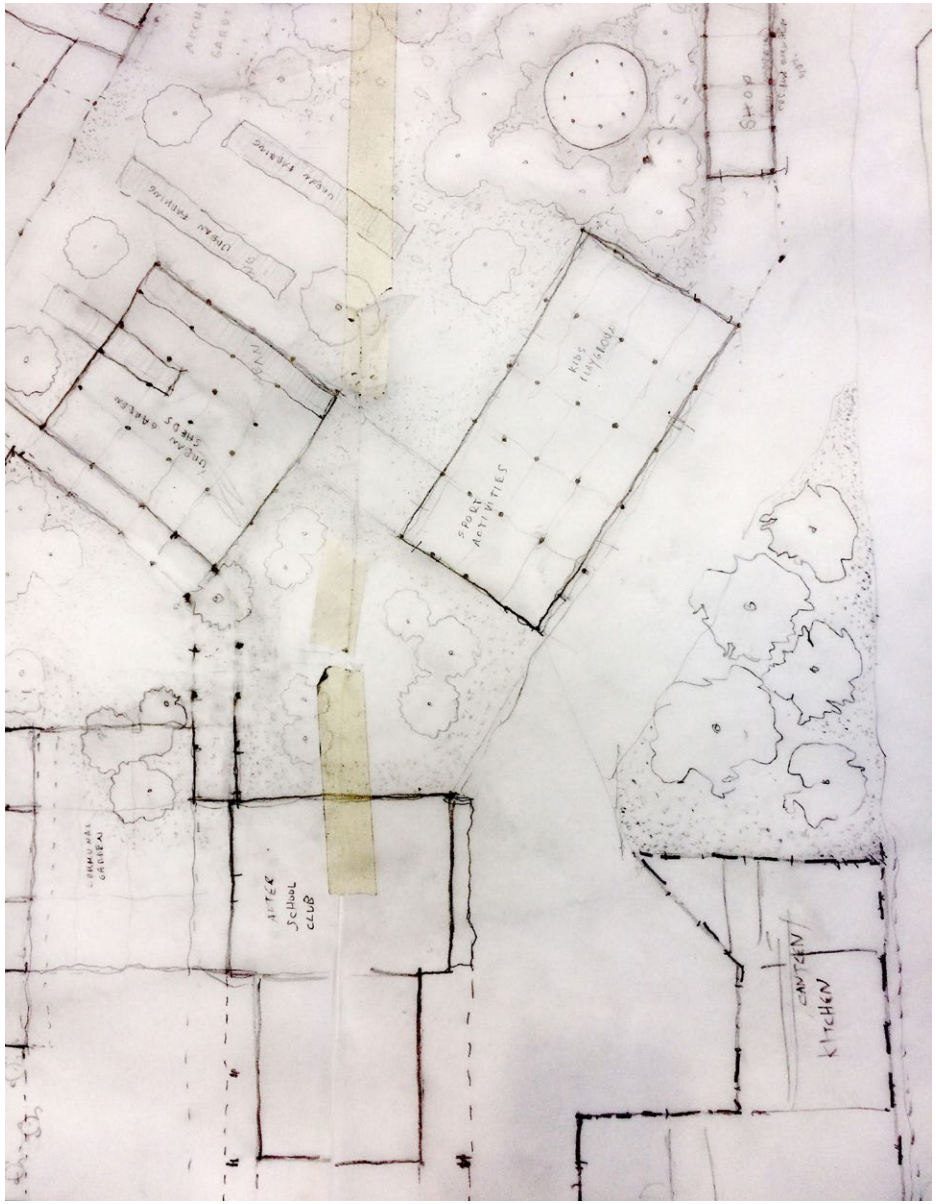

MOVEMENT 1.
Dancers listen to Davids introduction
"Can you see... that it's coming over...!"
SILENCE, except of bodily movement.
MOVEMENT 2.
Tape ripping to parcel package


"They are negative"
Car approaches.
woman enters in back ground.
Children play on steps
Adults walking up ramp
kid agoing from the steps on a mountainbike
school kid using steps formally
through to scene 4.
"There are two things here. And then there's a cavity thing."
"Lets see what we have here...." (Italian)
Large glazed windows flood space in light, drawing the user. [Abundance + opportunity]

**Performance** *noun*
the action of representing a character in a play[1]

1 'Definition of PERFORMANCE', accessed 10 February 2020, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/performance.

As the area develops with the growing population and densification of the city, these physical and social engagements have to evolve along with the city as it forms an essense to the character of the place. During the last century, Brussels transformed into an international capital, a process in which the quality of life of Brussel's own residents was not the first priority. To produce a masterplan for the area, the approach took the discovered engagements from the research as the primary starting point, acknowledging the series of spaces that exist with the evolved urban block that creates moments of surprise and intrigue. A beauty exists to these evolved forms, where multiple hands and styles are present, negotiated together in a frozen dialogue with one another. A constant dialogue between the past and the present can be read.



These first attempts at engaging in a discussion with the characters of Anderlecht can be viewed as the rehearsals, practices and tries to the perfomances of everyday life to occur in the neighbourhood.

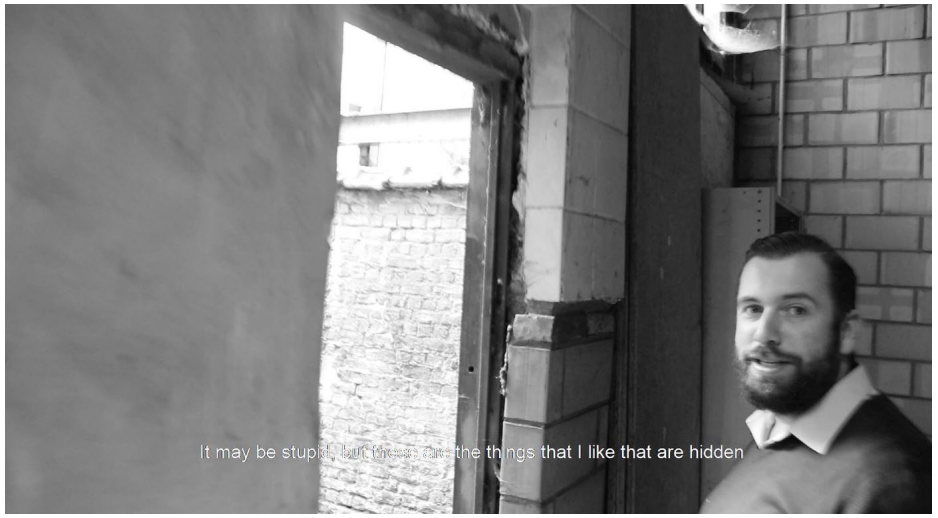
STUFF EXCHANGE
LIBRARY
PRIVATE GARDEN CONNECTION
CAFE
SHOP
KITCHEN

FOOTBALL PITCH
LIBRARY
PRIVATE GARDEN CONNECTION
STUDIO BUILDING WORKSHOPS
STUDY
WORK SPACE
SHOP
GREEN HOUSE
SHOP
SHOP

The observations and engagements of the research in Anderlecht was collected via film footage. A composed film was cut that compares and contrasts the different realities of the city, revealing a collective perception of Anderlecht. Along with telling a tale, the movie depicts the experience of the neighbourhood from a sensory point of view, allowing the viewer to hear, see and feel the scenery of the site. The film was displayed in black and white, allowing the characters of people and place to overlap and interlock, either having the potential to take the focus of the audience.

I understand reality as something we construct. As a construction I understand it as something that we can deconstruct, and rebuild into whichever shape we want to give to it.[1]

1 Louisiana Channel, Sebastian Diaz Morales: Rooms of Buenos Aires, 2014, https://vimeo.com/94011694.


It may be stupid, but these are the things that I like that are hidden

I thought of a way to do a double glazed window in a cheap way

**Denouement** *noun*
the outcome of a complex sequence of events[1]

1 'Definition of DENOUEMENT', accessed 10 February 2020, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/denouement.

To ensure that the engagements of physical and social are embedded into the masterplan, a phased development will be set out for the area, set across the dates 2020, 2030 and 2050. In 2020, a discussion will be opened with the community to understand the needs of the people that live in the neighbourhood. An exhibiton and community room, the plans for the area can be developed with the involvement of the inhabitants, giving an immediate and relevant response to the evolving neighbourhood. At 2030 the construction of a series of small public facilities will be executed following the conclusions of the research from 2020. Smaller developments integrate better into the physical and social fabric, along with having the advantage of remaining accessible to younger architects. The public facility structures of 2030 will form bookmarkers for the future high density housing to the site, meeting the demands of the growing city population.

The Graduation Project is set in 2030, at the time of construction of the new public facilities to Anderlecht. The functions are varied and at a small scale to serve the inhabitants of the immediate surrounding, collectively forming the Public House. With the analysis taken from the community discussions, the Public House will consist of a swimming pool, a library, a creche, a theatre, a boxing gym and a permanent place for the ongoing discussion with the community, the ‘Anderlecht House’.

The purpose of the Public House will be collective, however the execution of each will have it's own unique dialogue with the existing, harbouring the themes of surprise and intrigue uncovered from the film research and contributing to the irony and comical value of the neighbourhoods character. These dialogues will be expressed through the exploration the large scale models, rooted in the same methodological analysis of spolia, reconstructing the existing in detail to understand the value in holds and how it can contribute to the evolution of the neighbourhood.

Jeremy Till stated in his book 'Architecture Depends' that architecture which ignores the everyday will be ignored everyday.[1] Taking this into consideration, the project and research defines the public facilities as a stage set to everyday life with the community as it's characters. The engagements between the physical 'stage' and the social 'characters' produces the performance of the neighbourhood of Anderlecht. The richness of these engagements becomes engrained into the context, insuring these performances are preserved as the city continues to evolve.

1 Jeremy Till, Architecture Depends, 2013, 139.