Rotor Island

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

This research is the result of an ongoing work of search.

Throughout this process, research and design have been constantly interwoven together. Initially the research gave clues for the design, which in turn informed the research back.

The aim is to position the project toward the city, at different scales. In this act of positioning, the project reveals the problems of the city and tries to address them.

This research is presented in form of narrative. The text is divided in four main chapters, each one of which is an essay that deals with different aspects of the project, and contains elements of research, borrowed theories, ideas, quotes and reflections.

1) *"The rooms of Anderlecht"* explores the urban condition of the city, understood as the relationship between buildings and people.

2) *"The latent archipelago of Anderlecht"* discusses the relationship between buildings and the city.

3) *"Rotor Island"*, brings ideas about the building as an artifact in itself, independent from the city.

4) *"Recycling and Spolia"*, seeks to define a new meaning of the spolia, in view of the current and global environmental issues.

The intent is not to elaborate straight out conclusions, but to generate new questions and interpret them by means of architecture.

THE ROOMS OF ANDERLECHT

This first chapter wants to give an image of the urban condition that characterize Anderlecht today, and with *urban* I mean those aspects that concern the built part of the city in relationship with the life of the people living it. As in any other city, this condition is the result of a complex mix of forces that shaped the city, especially in the last century. First of all, it is important to make explicit the fact that the picture that I am trying to give of Anderlecht it is not a comprehensive image of the city, this would require a scientific analysis of its historical development that takes into account all the socio-economical reasons that influenced such developments. Would that be even possible or even makes sense to do? Instead, this should be considered an "as found" image of Anderlecht, literally the one that we have "discovered" during several trips around the site. This empiric approach to the city comes from the awareness of its deep complexity and recognition of our limits in understanding its totality. In return, it should be considered as a strategy that allows us to create an understanding of the city without falling into a pre-made idea of it.

The research started by walking around the neighborhood. The aim was to get an idea on the dynamics of the *everyday life* and discover the places where this unfolds. As Lefebvre brings up: "In one sense there is nothing more simple and more obvious than everyday life. How do people live? The question may be difficult to answer, but that does not make it any the less clear. In another sense, nothing could be more superficial: it is banality, triviality, repetitiveness. And in yet another sense nothing could be more profound. It is existence and the 'lived', revealed as they are before speculative thought has transcribed them: what must be changed and what is the hardest of all to change." [1]

In order to get an understanding of this "invisible", yet fundamental phenomena, we really tried to engage with the people of the neighborhood, listen to their stories, follow them in their routine and enter their private spaces. During this research we always tried to keep an anthropological attitude: be part of the scene to get the most out of it, but take a distance while trying to understand and rationalize afterwards. Then we started to document everything with the camera to create a short documentary that we later named "the rooms of Anderlecht".

In the medium of the video we found the best way to picture together two distinct aspects of the city, what Richard Sennet would call la *ville* and la *cité*. The *ville* is the built part of the city, its physical entity, while the *cité* is the way people live the city. The relationship that there is between the two is as much natural and spontaneous as it is ambiguous and difficult to codify. In a large perspective, it is evident that this relationship has links of cause and effect that act in both directions: they way we experience the built environment has an influence on our behaviour and they way we live will ultimately shape our cities.[2] However, we should not fall in the trap thinking that architecture, considered as the "art of building", enables by default the "art of living".[3] This is a timeless discussion around architecture and it is the crucial theme that Piranesi presented in the magnificent drawings of the *prisons*. Here, behind the first appearance of glorious architectural spaces, lays the metaphor of the city, where every project could create spaces "impossible" to inhabit, not made for humanity, indeed prisons.

With this in mind the field-research put the lenses on the *everyday life* of the neighborhood and explored the relationships and the frictions that occur with the built environment. The intent was not to make direct conclusions on the status of the urban condition of the place, but more to create a framework through which we were able to continue to investigate this complex phenomena. Through the lens of the camera one particular element of the city was identified as the most relevant in this regard: the *room*. Indeed the *room* became the very architectural dimension of the *everyday life*, an irreducible entity of the architectural space of the city. Soon we were able to create an image of the city formed by a continuous series of rooms, selected fragments of our investigations. The room acquired a wider extension of the term: not just an indoor space confined by four walls, but also any other particular spot in the city, the little square at the corner, the bus stop down the road, that bench in the park and so on. Indeed the spaces where *appropriation* happens in any sort of form. The room is what makes the cohabitation of different people possible in the city: even though its limits are not always evident, it is an act of separation and raise the awareness of certain "rules" that

each space requires. "A boundary is not that at which something stops, but is that from which something begins its presencing".[4]

This strategy will never depict a comprehensive image of the city, it is indeed very limited, but precisely because of this act of selection, it reveals the way we experience the city, which is a city made of separated parts. An analogy can be drawn with Piranesi's most famous plate, the *Ichnographia Campi Martii antiquae urbis.* Here Piranesi, drew the foreground of Campo Marzio at the time or the Roman empire. What he drew is not the actual survey of the ruins in their original state, but it is an imaginary reinterpretation of the city based on existing fragments. According to Aureli, Piranesi opposes to the scientific method, in favour of an ideological one, therefore legitimizing a reading of the city based on a selection of parts.[5] This act of selection and separation will be the way in which architecture can ultimately create order and give a direction within the chaotic nature of the urban.

This set of *rooms* became our collection of case studies, "highlights" of the place, buildings, that capture the stories of the people of the neighborhood and the relationship with the spaces that they inhabit:
- The former Leonida's warehouse (which was also the given site for the project), used by the architectural practice Rotor, together with a private sport center that has two football pitches.
- A former brewery factory, today occupied by a group of artist that live there and use the main building for exhibitions and events (En Silence)
- A generic warehouse, used by a dancing studio (Tic-Tac)
- A cluster of former industrial buildings, today used by the architects of the municipality and other small private construction businesses.
- A former wood warehouse, converted into a living and working place by a group of artist friends (The Other Side)
- A former unidentified warehouse, used as garage like working spaces by a local artisan and a video making studio.
- A modernist social-housing block known as Le Goujon, mainly inhabited by people with immigrant heritage.

In order to better understand the nature of those spaces, it is necessary to introduce at this point some historical background of the city. Brussel from being one of the leading industrial economies in the manufacturing sector in the 20th century, moved to an economy based mainly on the tertiary sector. Especially in Anderlecht, that was home to most of the local manufacturing industries of the city, this rapid shift in the service economy left its neighborhoods with many unanswered questions.

Firstly, Anderlecht's population presents an unemployment rate of 27%, which is one of the highest in the city and its mainly represented by residents with immigrant heritage. That is because, when the country economy shifted in the tertiary sector, native Belgians took over the new jobs opportunities, thus creating demand for skilled workers from foreign countries to work in a sector that was already in its way to decline. People from Greece, Italy and Spain moved initially to Brussel, followed later by other people from Morocco, Turkey and the former African colonies. So, from the 60's onwards, the later communities that followed this immigration end up struggling to adapt to the new economy based on services.[6]

Secondly, the urban fabric was left fragmented, presenting a high mix of residential and industrial buildings. When in the 19th century the metallurgic industry soared, the population of the capital increased up to almost five times, reaching the million inhabitants. Here, the south part of the Canal area, became one of the most attractive parts of the city for manufacturing, thanks to the connection to the railway system and the possibility to transport raw materials and supplies along the canal. The area became a rich mix of residential and industrial buildings, with a high number of workers from the factories living there. In addition, many other small to medium family businesses opened in places like Cureghem (Anderlecht) and Saint Gilles: new industrial buildings started to appear, filling up the space within the organic fabric of the residential neighborhoods.[7] Today some of those buildings have been adapted by other users, others are instead in a state of vacancy.

The rooms of Anderlecht, become themselves manifestation of the character of the place. Where the forces of the city and the forces of the everyday life constantly push each other. The story of Anderlecht it's hidden in its *rooms*.

On the one hand, it is a story of social diversity, communities and frictions. It's a story of different ways of living the city. It is a story of social adaptation and cohabitation, which goes up to the immigration history of the city.

On the other, it is also a story of different local businesses and local activities. It's a story of production and creativity, that remembers the industrial past of this place, and manifests the deep connection between the spaces of the city and its activities. When we look at the industrial buildings of Anderlecht and how they have been appropriated, we have a clear example of how the city is able to find ways to arrange itself and maintain its character. As Lefebvre puts it: "nothing disappears completely ... In space, what came earlier continues to underpin what follows ... Pre-existing space underpins not only durable spatial arrangements, but also representational spaces and their attendant imagery and mythic narratives." [8]

This local diversity its what define the character of a place like Anderlecht and is what connects the city with its past, therefore is something that should be protected against the urban forces of what Jane Jacobs would call "bad gentrification". Having realized the many and complicated connections that exist between the city and its inhabitants, it becomes clear in a more particular way, that the project of the city is also a project of the life of its inhabitants. As Jane Jacobs would say, modernist developments have a too rigid and strict concept of this phenomena and they might cause the impossibility of this diversity to grow and cherish . "There is no way of overcoming the visual boredom of big plans. It is built right into them because of the fact that big plans are the product of too few minds. If those minds are artful and caring, they can mitigate the visual boredom a bit; but at the best, only a bit. Genuine, rich diversity of the built environment is always the product of many, many different minds, and at its richest is also the product of different periods of time with their different aims and fashions. Diversity is a small scale phenomenon. It requires the collection of little plans".[9]

1

Extracted frames from the "The rooms of Anderlecht".
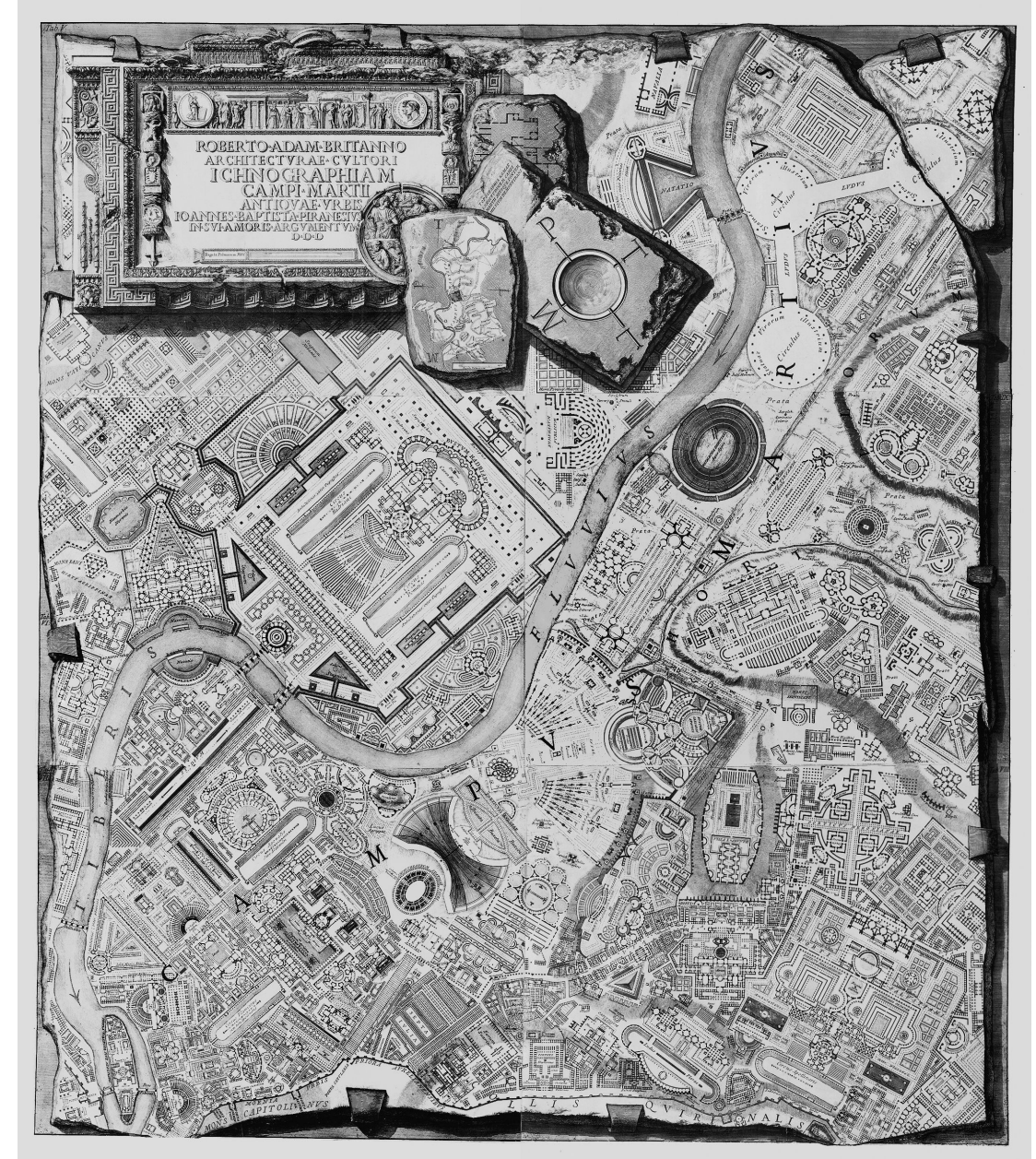
2

Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Ichnographia

Campi Martii antiquae urbis, 1762.

3

Random photograph of a street poster taken around the Cureghem Abattori in Anderlecht. This "as found" image is a trace of the multicultural mix of the neighborhood.

DÉFENSE de FUMER

4

Former industrial building found around Anderlecht, now appropriated as working space. Example of the manufacturing spirit still present in the neighborhood.

THE LATENT ARCHIPELAGO OF ANDERLECHT

Architecture and Memory

If the previous chapter focus more on the relationship between buildings and everyday life, here will be discussed the relationship between architecture and the city, considered as material artifacts.

The city is something that exists before us, and when architecture has the intent to confront itself with the city, then has to confront itself with its past. "The comparison with the ancient, with the past, is really attributable to the ambitions of an earthworm who wants to measure the greatness of a large cathedral. The past is infinite. It has no beginning, it has no end and it is always. Since the past has no beginning, it has no end, and it always is … it is impossible to know it and it is impossible to reduce it to a source of models for our work in this world."[10] This however should not preclude the possibility of a positivist role of architecture in the confrontation with the past, but brings up the necessities in understanding how the city develops and how its knowledge is carried on.

The city changes in a slow process of production through time. As an object, it imprints in its material entity its own history, becoming a record of the actions and the reasons that brought it into being. In spite of this fact, a linear accumulation of knowledge is not possible, buildings get lost and others get rediscovered. In this manner, the knowledge of the city can be seen as our written culture, subjected to an inevitable, yet fundamental act of filtration through time. It would be impossible to remember all the books that have been written in the past, we would become like Funes, the Memorious, protagonist of the novel from Jorge Luis Borges. Funes would remember all the details of the things that he saw and experienced, he would know everything, making him incapable of any understanding.[11] So, the city evolves and its historical knowledge, made of all the urban artifacts that the city saw, leaves place to a "collective memory" of the city itself.

This act of filtration, interpretation and abstraction of the city, implies that there is also an "idea" of the city that goes beyond of its actual material entity. Therefore, this "collective memory" of the city, should be understood as the relationship between: the collective of its people, the "idea of the city" and the "city as object" (which of course are two aspects that constantly overlap with each other).[12]

Geography of industries: stability vs instability

While the "idea of the city" was explored more in the previous chapter, defining the character of Anderlecht, here will be taken into analysis the physical structure of the city in its qualitative aspects. We need to consider that, in spite of the fact the city is shaped by us humans, the city has an autonomous way of developing, if we consider the fact that is a long term project the overlooks the intentions of the singular individual.

So, how can we study in the most objective way the dynamics of the material entity of the city? This phenomena can be read in the morphology of the city. A beautiful way to do that, is to look at the city with the eyes of a geographer. In facts, the city in its autonomous evolution is able to form with the landscape an inseparable body. Paul Vidal de la Blache is considered to be the father of human geography, an illuminating way to look at the relationship between human, city and economy. "In order to arrive to a proper understanding of geography, an awareness of the influence of the local milieu must be supplemented by an awareness of that of commerce". [13]

This is particularly of interest when we look at the geography of Brussel's industries. Here, we can recognize a specific pathway of settlements, which are the result of an historical distribution of productive spaces that follows a precise infrastructure, socio-spatial and economic/business logic. Not considering the Canal area, which is the main and more straightforward settlement along the canal, the rest of the settlements can be divided into three main categories: A) *manufacturing blocks adjoining other land uses,* B) *highly mixed zones,* C) *industrial zones.*[14] Around Anderlecht we can find a mix of all of those. But the second category, *highly mixed zones,* is the first one that particularly captured our interest. This category, is characterized by a specific urban form, where the industrial buildings found a "tune" within the residential settlements from the 19th century. That is the case of the buildings of Tic-Tac studio and the architecture office of the municipality. In fact, they are placed at the heart of what looks like a urban islands, whose perimeter is made by a series of row houses. Here they have found their "safe" spot, where the houses cannot be extended any further because of regulations. Instead, when we look at the Rotor building in this perspective, we can

clearly see its instability: the building finds itself in a position highly valuable for residential and it's already being listed for demolition.

In this regard, should the demolition of this former factory be considered a spontaneous metabolic process of the city? And if so, should this be considered legitimate and undeniable or should be somehow confronted?

In order to respond to that I would like to better explain certain aspects that are proper to the development of the city. In our capitalist society, the property of the land results fragmented and transformation of the city is mostly influenced by decisions of economic nature, done by both private and public actors. Those decisions follow economic priorities and do not have a subordinate[d] relationship with the form of the city. The economic forces in respect to the city are indeed an autonomous force and act on the city through speculation and expropriation.[15] Therefore, in the context of this research, the forces of the real estate market are incontrovertible. However, since such speculative developments are independent and have no goals for the city, architecture should act as a mediator: in this case, to allow for such residential developments, while at the same time absorbing their potential threats and give back to the city an appropriate form.

Another interesting quality of the industrial heritage of Anderlecht is that it creates a sort of city within the city, something like a urban "archipelago". The theory of the Archipelago was firstly explored by Ungers and presented as a proposal to address the urban fragmentation of the postwar Berlin. Ungers uses the Archipelago as a urban strategy: new projects can be placed, in form of "islands", within the "sea" of the fragmented urban fabric, in order to achieve a new set of relationships within the city, which is the "archipelago". [16] This reading of the city made of separated parts, enables the dialectic potential of architecture within the city. As Aureli explains, in this sense the archipelago of Ungers it is very different from the *Collage City* of Rowe, since the latter is more a morphological composition of different fragments that create a continuous whole and for this reason nullifies the dialectic potential of clearly separated and contrasting parts. What Ungers was interested in, was to compare new different forms of metropolitan living, in order to challenge the status quo of modernist architecture at the time.[17] A prerequisite of an "island" building it is its finite form, that makes it recognizable

and therefore allows for a comparison with other species of its kind. The fact that during the research we were able do individuate such industrial buildings (in a city completely unknown to us), suggest that such buildings have indeed certain common characteristics that separates them from the rest of the urban fabric. Both when the urban fabric is fragmented, neither when is tight and organic, some industrial buildings are able to create a state of exception and therefore be recognizable. It is interesting to recognize a similarity in the geographical reading of the city (morphological reading) and the theory of the archipelago, that reveals the way in which humans experience the built environment and process it in order to understand it. "The heath, the woods, the cultivated fields, the uncultivated areas are related in an inseparable whole, of which man brings with him the memory" (Paul Vidal de la Blache)[18]. The archipelago, though, adds an additional step: it allows to select specific urban fragments and buildings and assign them a specif political vision for the city. Whatever new use will be made of those buildings, they will perform a prominent role in the city. Therefore, the industrial buildings of Anderlecht, should be preserved, not only for their heritage qualities, but also for their inherent potential to create a urban archipelago. For this reason they should be considered as Anderlecht's main architectural asset. Now, if the aim of the project of Anderlecht, so far, is to allow for new housing developments, while preserving the creative/manufacturing spirit of the place, every industrial building should be seen as an opportunity to experiment new forms of living and working.
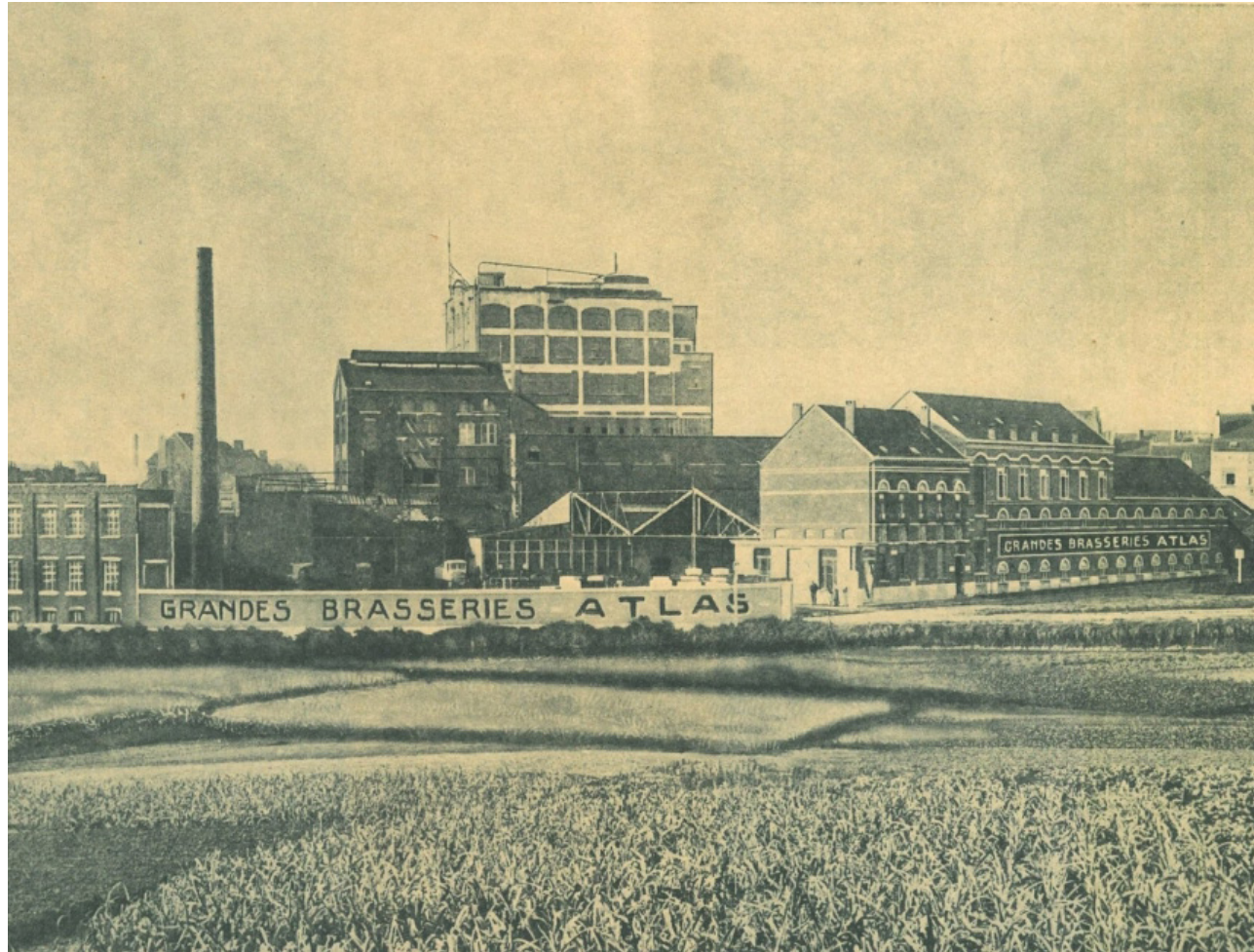
5
Brasserie Atlas, unknown source. Brasseries Atlas: former brewery factory in the heart of Anderlecht.
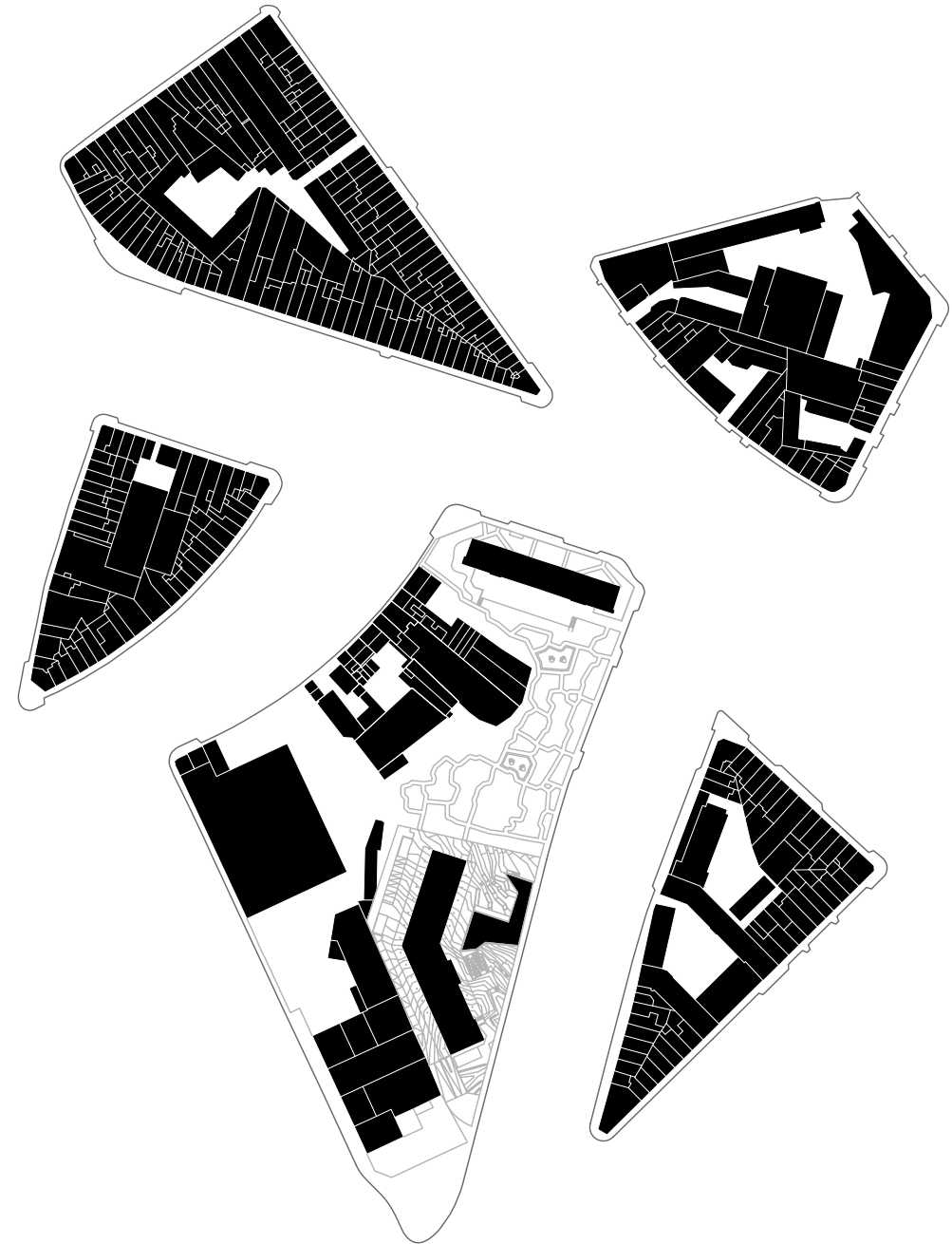
6
Morphological survey of the neighborhood, reduced to a selection of urban islands.
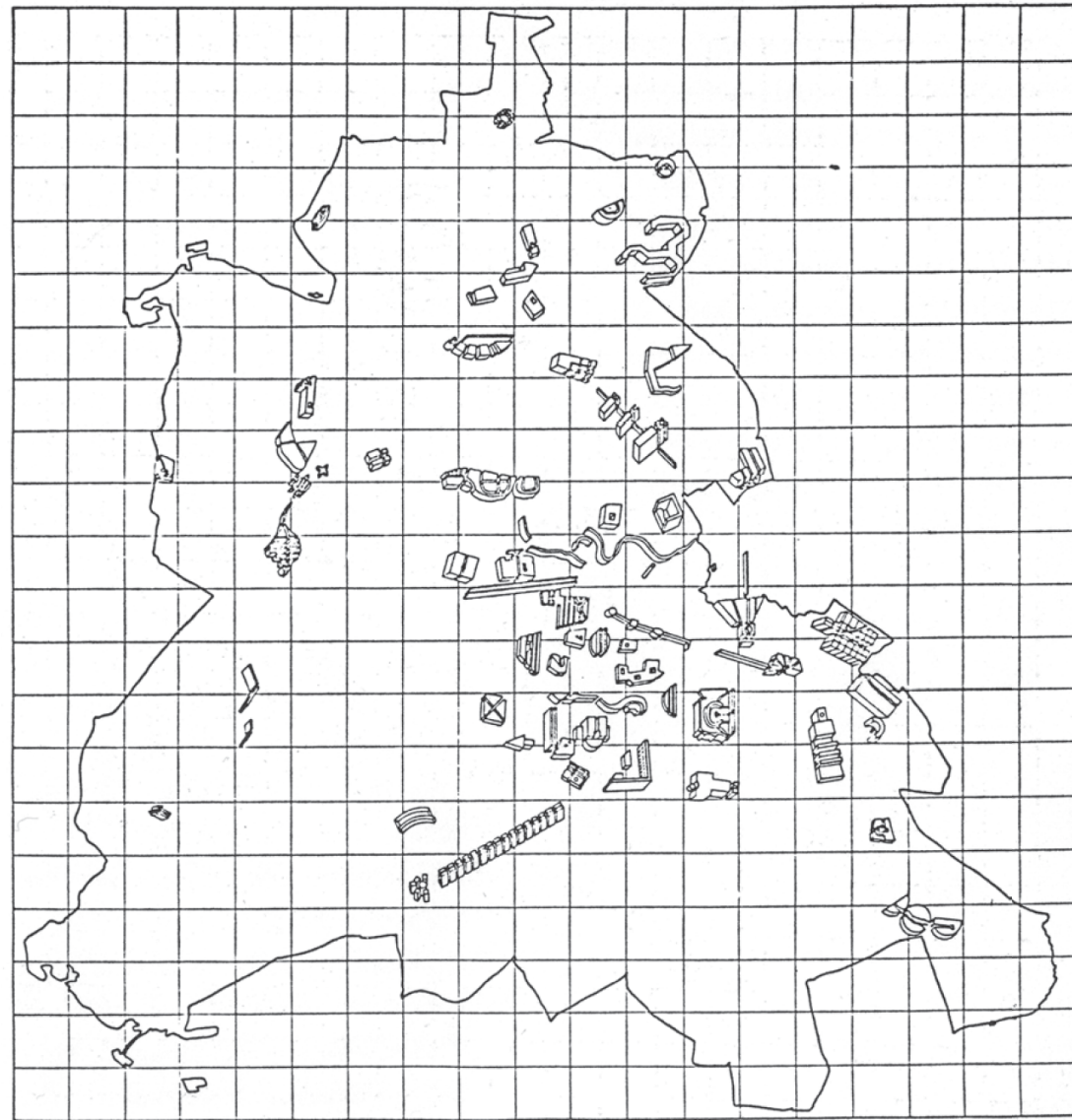
7

Oswald Mathias Ungers, Rem Koolhaas, Hans Koolhoff, Arthur Ovaska, and Peter Rienmann, The City within the City - Berlin as a Green Archipelago, 1977. The city as a "project of crisis", shrinking the city to its significant and irreducible parts (Pier Vittorio Aureli).

8

New industrial plan for Brussels with its suburbs. Plan drawn and engraved by Aug. Verwest, vignettes drawn by F. Xhardez, engraved by M. Vanderoost, 1910. Industrial heritage of the city seen a latent urban archipelago.

ROTOR ISLAND

While the previous chapter brings up ideas regarding the relationship between architecture and the city in regard of time and space, this chapter focuses on the qualitative characteristic of the form, which gives the building an inherent capability of permanence.

Taking into consideration the Former Leonida's factory, object of this research, it is necessary to consider first industrial buildings in general. To better understand the nature of industrial buildings, it is interesting to look at the work of Bernd e Hilla Becher, that explores with the use of photography the formal qualities of those artifacts. The photographs were taken in order to objectify the subject: the artifacts were pictured under a neutral light, with a frontal and elevated view to render them as architectural elevations with all the vertical straight. Then the subjects were presented in form of a matrix, divided for typology, in order to be comparable.[19] Those images reveal the idiosyncratic character of industrial buildings, which is an important quality that makes them stand out in the mixed landscape of the city. However, as we have seen the previous chapter, this characteristic alone is not what gives such buildings the possibility to be firmly settled in their context.

Disposable form

For sure an architect that reflected a lot upon the form and permanence was Aldo Rossi. In *The Architecture of City*, he expresses a detachment from the city, seen as an autonomous object that encompasses our limited temporal condition. In regard of time, the form is what defines the position of an artifacts in the city, as something more permanent or more temporary. For this reason Rossi considers "function" as something that should be always subordinated to "form". "Artifacts like the Theater at Arles or the Palazzo della Ragione in Padua tend to synchronize with the process of urbanization because they are not defined only by an original or previous function, nor by their context, but have survived precisely because of their form—one which is able to accommodate different functions over time."[20] When a building adapt to its functions overtime and by absorbing this change with its form, it acquires a special relationship with its context (economical, political, social, cultural) that Rossi defines as *locus*.

When we take in consideration the Rotor building, its *locus* becomes problematic. An industrial building, by definition, is shaped for the purpose of its function; in the case of the former Leonida's warehouse, it is just a large container, which not very suitable for residential use. However, the simplicity of the structure and the flexibility of the space, holds certainly potential for the realization of a working and living complex.

The formal aspect of a building, that determines the possibility of finding its *locus,* reside in its *disposable* character. Disposable is here understood in the original sense of the term, as "free to be used as the occasion may require, available" (1650s). In contrast with the meaning that we use mostly nowadays which is "designed to be discarded and thrown-away after one use".[21] The reappropriation of the term, here, goes together with the reappropriation of industrial artifacts. This has to be understood as statement against the side effect of a consumerist society that industrialization happened to cause and of which industrial buildings are a symbol.

It is also interesting to mention the relevance that Ungers gives to the disposable characteristic in relationship to the archipelago.

Aureli, reports: "A fundamental aspect of buildings that aspire to be "cities within the city" is their disposable form vis-à-vis further development and change, and that such a possibility is more feasible with a finite form, which, by being straightforward in its function, allows for its appropriation by the inhabitants."[22]

Disposable form is what extends the individual use of an object, to a collective use of it through the passage of time. One of the most radical example of disposable architecture is the Dom-Ino House, designed by Le Corbusier in 1914. This prototype, consisted in the simplest concrete structure, three slabs supported by a few columns. Le Corbusier took inspiration from Albert Kahn, pioneer in the construction of factory buildings and applied this technology to domestic constructions, in view of the post war reconstruction.[23] What is so revolutionary about this project is that it is just a structure that can be anything. The Dom-Ino House though, represents the *tabula rasa* condition for living, since it can be appropriated through time and enter the collective dimension of the city.[24]

Another construction that can be read as an example of disposable architecture was the Crystal Palace, erected in Hyde Park, London to host the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations* in 1852. The construction was entirely made of prefabricated cast iron, laminated wood and standardized glass panels and was designed in order to be dismantled and rebuilt somewhere else. The entire construction was based on a modular composition of elements and their reiteration. This basic module was repeated for 564 meters to make the entire length of the building and could be repeated to the infinity.[25] For this reason, the Crystal Palace could be considered the embodiment, in architectural form, of the forces of industrialization that pushed the city out of its territorial limits. Furthermore, the arrangement of large volume of spaces, made possible form and circulation in one single compositional gesture; where the empty space, framed by the rigid modular construction, allowed for appropriation by free motion, revealing the possibility of life of independently arrange itself in the space.

What is emblematic about this building is the empty space that is contained in it. The empty space was meant to be appropriated in different ways, blurring the limits of its function. It was an indoor garden, with water features and planted trees; a public space, hosting events for large crowds like music concerts; and of course an exhibition space where any sort of object could be freely arranged.

Yet presumably the emptiness is closely allied to the special character of place, and therefore no failure, but a bringing-forth. Again, language can give us a hint. In the verb "to empty" (leeren) the word "collecting" (lesen), taken in the original sense of the gathering which reigns in place, is spoken. To empty a glass means: To gather the glass, as that which can contain something, into its having been freed. To empty the collected fruit in a basket means: To prepare for them this place. Emptiness is not nothing. It is also no deficiency. In sculptural embodiment, emptiness plays in the manner of a seeking-projecting instituting of places. [26]
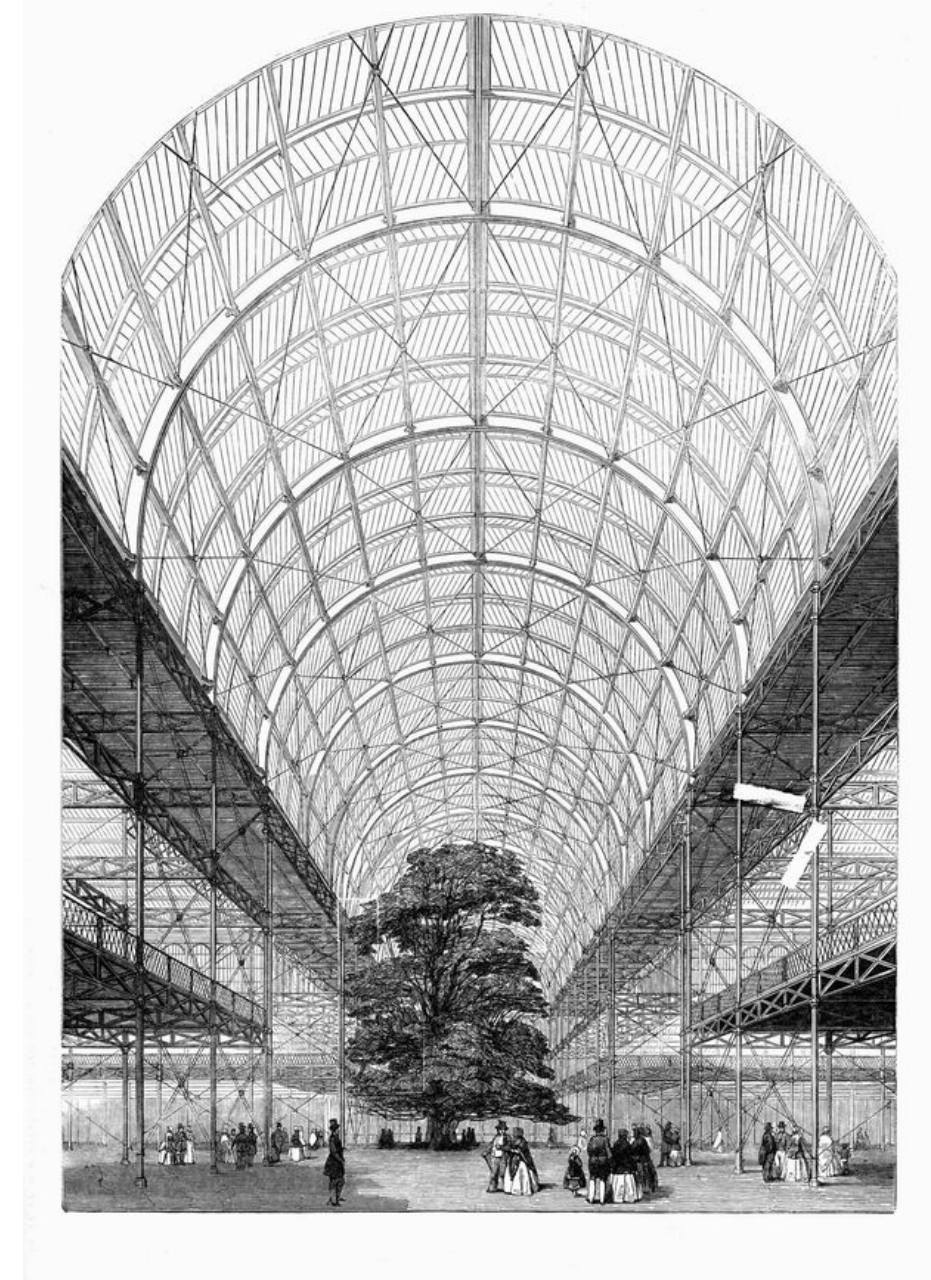

9

Bernd and Hilla Becher: "grain elevators". The idiosyncratic character of those buildings, reveal their "form follows function" nature.
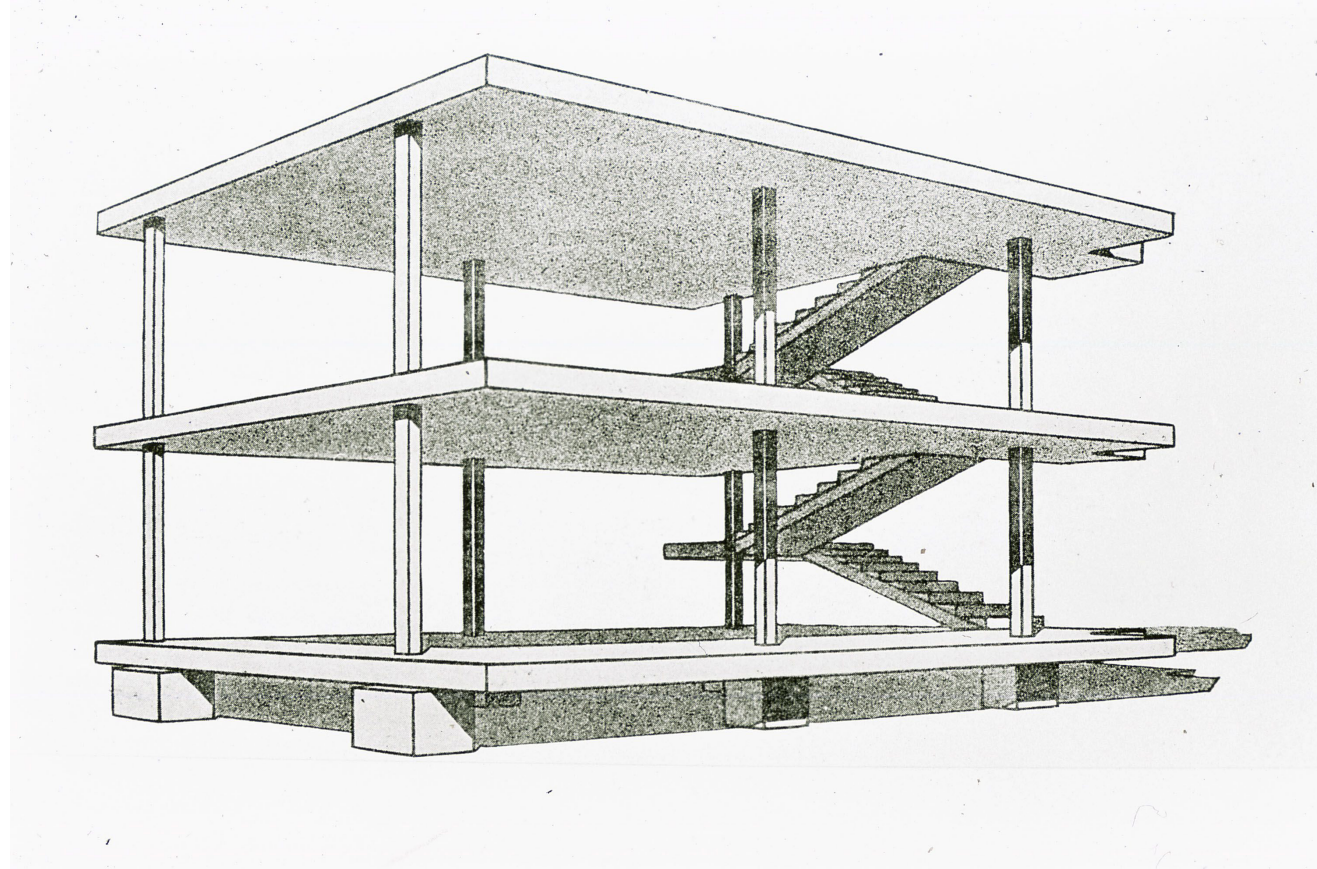
10
Le Corbusier, Dom-Ino House, 1914: structure for future appropriation.

11
The Crystal Palace, London: empty space available for different uses.

RECYCLING AND SPOLIA

A spolia is generally considered in architectural terms as an element of a building, even a fragment, that in a second moment becomes part of a new construction. Historically the reuse of construction elements has always been a common practice, done both for economical reasons and ideological ones.

Nowadays, the economical pressure on the land reduced the time frame of the demolition of a building, compromising the possibility of careful deconstruction of the elements for further reuse. The economical value of a recycled construction material became a false perception, being the production ex novo of the same element less expensive in most of the cases.[27] However, the growing interest in a circular economy, is giving value again to the use of recycled materials, opening up new questions to be addressed by architectural means.

In this chapter, it will be discussed what can be the architectural meaning of the spolia today, in view of the awareness of the current environmental issues, which is the generator of this new interest in material reuse.

First of all, an ontological clarification of the spolia has to be done. The previous definition of the spolia determines that an object becomes a spolia in the moment that becomes part of a new construction. When an element gets separated from a building and is waiting to find another use, we can say that it is not a spolia, but an element which could potentially become a spolia. This implies a strict philosophical hierarchy between subject and object, where the subject needs to express the potential of the object.

To express the potential of a spolia, is not only to use it in a clever way as part of a new project, but also to give a value to it. When Piranesi had to imagine the reconstruction of Rome back to the age of the Roman Empire, he started by selecting a series of fragments, objects, ruins. In *Scenographia Campi Martii* he represents a collection of those elements which would represent the starting point for a new project of the city. The value given to those elements was not only

of heritage but primarily political. In order to understand this operation, the work of Piransi has to be collocated in relation to the important tradition of *instauratio urbis,* which is the long term project of the development of Rome during the 15th century, in which the Church attempted to establish its power in continuity with the one of the ancient Roman Empire.[28] For Piranesi, the selection of certain elements, was the answer to the question "what to keep" (from the complex and historically layered reality of Rome). This implied the legitimation of an ideological approach to the city, over a scientific one, that would allow Piranesi to freely interpret the city from his own point of view. The objectification of the intentions is what gives value to an object, and here lies the political potential of the spolia.

Thinking about now, we know the world is facing unforeseen environmental issues, which is forcing the economy to change.

Since the industrial revolution, cities had drastically overtaken the territory, in a way that was never seen before. Population also started to grow exponentially, by 2050 the world population is predicted to reach the 9 billions, while only two centuries ago we were only 1 billion. It is now widely accepted that we find ourselves in the geological epoch that scientists call anthropocene, which is defined as the condition in which the earth, understood as the set of physical, chemical and biological characteristics in which life takes place and evolves, is strongly influenced on a local and global scale by the effects of human action, giving rise to vast and threatening phenomenas such as climate change, mass extinction and pollution. When we consider the construction industry, we know that buildings are responsible for some of the 40% of global CO_2 emissions. Moreover, the production of construction waste in major cities is continuing to grow. Brussels, for example produces every year an amount of construction waste that, if you would arrange it in the shape of a pyramid, it would exceed the dimensions of the Great Pyramid of Giza. Most of this waste, notwithstanding the effort of current recycling policies, is not used for the construction of new buildings, but downgraded for marginal uses.[29]

In this scenario, nature, understood as a non-artificial thing, untouched by human activity, hardly exists anymore. While landscapes got mastered and became an inseparable part of the city, the city continues to reveal its chaotic nature, to the point that is difficult to distinguish

what is cultural from what is natural. In Real Nature Is Not Green, the Dutch artist and
philosopher Koert van Mensvoort, proposes to overcome this paradox by distinguishing what
is *controllable* vs. what is *autonomous.*[30]
It is hard for us to act on vast phenomenas that are not very tangible. In this regard, the work
of the photographer Edward Burtynsky, we can say, gives an image to anthropocene. In his
documentary he films traces of human action on a territorial scale: urbanization, mining,
industrialization and agriculture; bringing up the evidence that humans have become, to use
his words, "the single most defining force on the planet". Such terrific and at the same time
terrifying images, leave you for sure with a wired feeling of anger and responsibility.

It is possible to argue that, with the advent of industrialization and the society of
consumption, our anthropocentric status quo degraded into a flattening condition and turned
into mere selfishness in regard to the planet. Scalbert would say, "if nature's problem is man,
then man's problem is consciousness". [31]
How do we think ourselves out of this situation? Where our western consciousness is in
conflict with the well-being of the planet?

Instead to trying to overturn the paradox, we should constantly reflect on our position in
the planet. We should consider the planet as something that is offered to us, but this should
not make us fall into the acceptance of our behaviour and justify laissez-faire strategies. The
circular economy transition will require a world wide effort of planning. However, the small
scale should not be overlooked.

The use of recycled construction elements as spolia is important. It might not have an
economical value, but it has for sure an ideological one. It would be naive to think that a
reused brick could make a difference in the reduction of our world wide construction waste.
However, if used consciously as such it is recognizable, it could have a political value. It could
be the objectification of our efforts in taking responsibility towards the planet. It could be an
architectural trade mark of this current situation. And it could ultimately make us better grasp
the invisible forces that are constantly informing and deforming our world.

12

Blue limestone blocs, found on Opalis (online inventory of the professional sector in salvaged building material). The family business "Pougin" specialises in wooden and blue stone floors dating from before the first half of the 19th century.

13

One of the many blue limestone quarries in Belgium.

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