From traces to spatial narratives

*An experimental conservation of architecturale traces*

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Rue Drevet 1, Paris
Portera Mason, 2017
Picture (fig. 1)
Preface

Walking in the historic part of Paris, in Montmartre a few months ago, I was not expecting to pass by such an impressive site. Looking at the context and all the buildings around, I first had a feeling of nostalgia thinking about the demolition of the previous houses. However, I quickly got amazed by all the elements that were displayed in front of me.

In the 60’s Aldo Van Eyck built playgrounds on temporarily unused plots of land.\(^1\) Nowadays it’s popular among architectural collectives such as Raumlabor in Berlin to propose projects in temporary urban gaps with the idea of improving public spaces.\(^2\) I am interested in this type of approach, but I have decided to look at the potential of those spaces from another perspective.

*Structures appear, things are repaired and replaced, and some disappear, while new permanent are made.*\(^3\) In the process of transformation that cities go through, buildings are torn down, and traces and fragments appear. These places exist only temporarily while waiting for something new to be built. Through this process buildings are demolished to give space for a new one to be built. While pending in this state between the new and old, the print of a building once standing there become visible. Materialities and structures never meant to be shown are now displayed. When others see ruins and spaces in debris, I see an abundant source of inspiration for architecture and design.

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1 Aldo Van Eyck, Important architect of the structuralism movement in the Netherland
2 Raumlabor, Interdisciplinary collective based in Berlin, «Architecture is an experimental laboratory for a moment related to the participatory work practice in urban area» http://raumlabor.net/statement
3 Peake Nigel, In the City : Drawings by Niger Peake, Princeton architectural press, 2013, p8
Intention

Architectural conservation describes the process through a preserving of layers of history when working with the existing materiality. The integrity of the already is shown care for and operations on the existing is carefully planned. In contrast to this, renovation is about improving the state of a building by the making of new interventions. As an interior architect, I have an interest to develop projects in relation to the environment. As for my bachelor thesis, I wrote about the Conservation of the built environment for a new architecture.\textsuperscript{1} While working with the Belgian collective Rotor, I have learnt from their method of reusing materials from deconstructed buildings, and I realized how this practice influences their design projects.\textsuperscript{2} This has made me reflect upon methods and ways of developing projects today. I would like to challenge the borders between the past, the future, authenticity, conservation and innovation in the field of interior architecture.

Fascinated by traces from the past, and by the making of the new, I am aiming to merge this interests in my research. From this point of departure I am questioning

**How can components from a previous construction influence a design project today? How can the qualities from my research be translated into a new project?**

My intention is to translate elements from the past into contemporary proposals. Where old forms are paraphrased into new forms and materiality. I wish to use the built environment and collect aesthetic qualities that are present and use them as a tool box when I work with my translations. By using this method I want to work with the notion of memory connected to what is existing in a site. From traces to spatial narratives is an experimental conservation of architecturale traces.

\textsuperscript{1} Portera Manon Conservation of the built environment for a new architecture, bachelor thesis, Geneva University of Art and Design, 2014
\textsuperscript{2} Rotor is a Belgian association of people who share a common interest in material flow in industry, construction, design and architecture, founded in 2005
**Intention**

*Define notions*

- **Traces**
  Surviving mark, sign, or evidence of a former existence or passing of something.

- **Conservation**
  Preservation and repair of archaeological, historical, and cultural sites and artefacts.

- **Experimental**
  Based on untested ideas or techniques and not yet established or finalized. Involving a radically new and innovative style.

- **Experimental conservation**
  Idea of working with the notion of conservation with an experimental approach that doesn’t aims to conserve a particular object in a perfect state. This working method allows to select parts of a place, that are interesting for different reasons, and to create new spatial proposals in a new context.
Context

Urban gap through history

Living in the city of Brussel before to move to Stockholm, I have noticed the difference when it comes to the daily architectural experience. Walking in Brussel, it’s common to see spaces where a building has been demolished and not rebuild. Indeed, vacant spaces appear temporarily in the urban fabric in response to urban transformations. One of the reason is the city planning policy that allows private owners to sale houses to bigger investors. But the process of planning a new project can be slow down by authorities after being accepted. That is why urban gaps can be left in a waiting state from weeks to years. This in-between period let us see what is usually not suppose to be shown in architecture, and this is what catched my intention.

On the other hand, Stockholm city has been planed in a different way. In the beginning of the XXs century, politicians and academicians were aiming to propose a complete new way of living. Standart housing blocs has been built with the idea to offer a new living model for families. This modernist idea of the city has slowly lead to a standardisation, that we can still recognize today with the wish to assure a strict beauty board trying to preserve the silhouette of Stockholm in a conservative way.

With this comparaison, I am trying to explore how the making of the city can be described in making and construction, as much as by the history of urban design. The urban planning of Brussel is organic in the sense that tansformations are not following a global aesthetic logic, while the city of Stockholm follows a grid that is less flexible. From my point of view, this two models relates to the approach of Collage City where the authors are rejecting the utopian visions of total planning and total design, and propose instead a collage city which can accomodate a whole range of utopias in miniature.¹ For them, new cities should be designed with these multiple layers of history, as if it had been built over a long period of time.

¹ Koetter Fred, Rowe Colin, Collage City, Mit Press, 1978
Collage city
Colin Rowe & Fred Koetter, 1978
Diagram of city (fig.2)
Method

*Learning through archiving and reproducing*

My personal interest about the unexpected aesthetic of *urban gaps* led me to explore and research a series of sites. Indeed, each single site had its own specificities and encouraged me to discover more of them. The first part of the project has been about mapping these empty spots, via the help of Google map. The archive of addresses is collected on a conceptual map representing the city of Brussels and the floor plan of urban gaps on a different scale in order to accentuate the image of the demolished area.¹ I have used plans to draw a series of sites, and created the 3D models in Rhino with the help of Google Street View to define scales.² In order to look at the qualities of the space, I've translated the computer file into 1:20 wooden models.³ The uniformity of the models allows me to highlight the space and the relation to the buildings around.

But after going directly on site, I got a completely different point of view concerning the content of those urban gaps. My interest was not only about the idea of an available site in between two buildings. I became more fascinated by all the details that appeared in front of me (cf. fig.7 - fig.8). I could not see them previously because of the bad quality of the image on Google map. From this moment, I decided to abandon the idea of developing a spatial intervention on site. Instead, I wanted to focus on the elements that create this informal beauty, including a range of materials, structures, colors, forms and tactility.

In the learning process, I have used different types of mediums that allowed me to look at the sites from different perspectives, and to take decisions.

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¹ *Archive of addresses, Mapping the urban gap in the city of Brussels,* (cf. fig.3)
² *Rhino* is a software for modelisation in 3 dimensions
³ *Wooden model, Reproduction of urban gaps* (cf. fig.6)
Mapping the urban gap in the city of Brussel
Line drawing, scale 1:1000
Portera Manon (fig.3)
Archive of urban gaps
Screenshot from google map (fig.4)
Representing urban gaps in the city of Brussel
Collage technique
Portera Manon (fig.5)
Reproduction of urban gaps
Wooden models, scale 1:100
Portera Manon (fig.6)
Detail of a facade
Picture, Brussel, 2018
Portera Manon (fig.7)
Facade details, rue blablabla
Picture, Brussel, 2018
Portera Manon (fig.8)
Method
Finding through making

- Making Pictures
Looking at a space where a building has been standing, it’s plenty of traces, marks and prints from the past. The documentation via a serie of pictures has been a good way to collect and discover the different layers of history. Being on site, allowed me to look at things from different points of view, and to frame them in a way that make me look at some specific details (cf. fig.9).

- Finding references
The aesthetic of the pictures reminds me a series of photographs of the devastation from the storm Katrina, by the artist Clay Ketter. The pictures taken from above are showing the remaining traces of an architecture once standing there. (cf. fig.10). Clay Ketter also worked on sculptural, and architectural pieces that share many of the features of the paintings: even though they extend into three-dimensional space, they retain the «image» quality, as if space would be reduced to a layering and montage of flat surfaces, and «building flatness» still required that the art of surfaces be respected.

The Art context of Clay Ketter’s work allows his photographies to be a capture of something, and to stand as art pieces. In my work, the photography is part of the method. It’s used as a tool to look at things from a specific eye. And the aim is to translate my findings into another architectural context. I would say that the project Surface Habitat for appliance work has some similarities with my approach of translation. In this case, the components of pictures are reinjected into 3 dimensional kitchen sculptures (cf. fig.11).

1 Ketter Clay is an American artist based in Sweden, working at the border line with architecture, sculpture and images.
Documenting traces of urban gaps
Portera Manon, 2018
Pictures (fig.9)
Devastation from the storm Katrina
Picture, 1997
Clay Ketter (fig.10)
Surface Habitat for Appliance
Mixed media, 1997
Clay Ketter (fig.11)
Method
Finding through making

- Making Hand drawings (fig.12)
In order to classify the components that interested me from this analyse, I looked at the serie of pictures and extracts individual parts. The translation into hand drawing gave me a certain freedom to interprete a serie of details. I quickly got a collection of elements that I have tried to classify. The temporarity of the place allow the «deconstructo» to act on the site without thinking to much about the aesthetic result, and this is what I find beautiful in those places.

- Finding caracteristics

**Addition** : Temporary structures are added to maintain buildings. They are often colorful. It creates a dynamic on the facades.

**Cover** : Different types of textiles are covering the facades to protect. Unexpected forms appears. Transparency and opacity creates new layers of materiality.

**Unplanned** : Wooden structures are added randomly to fix the fabric. It creates different grids and rythm with no particular logic.

**Figures** appear as a result of addition or substraction of different materials. More or less organically. Different deepness of materials relates next to each others.

**Removed** : From volume to flatness, Previous indoor colors are now displayed outdoor. Tiles are removed and let traces appears. Old elements are highlighted because the view is now open. Some parts are cut and allow new forms to be shown.

**Materiality** : Serie of materials meet together like tiles, wood, metal, concrete, fabric. Accidental details are revealed. Size, colors, orientation, thickness create a collage of materials

**Gap** : Gaps opens up the view and allow buildings to breath.

**Corner** : Corner are accentuated by added structures, or different types of spaces in between them.
Findings through extracting
Hand drawings
Portera Manon (fig.12)
Method

Finding through making

- Making Models
Attracted by some details of the sites, I first selected fragments of facades and made a series of physical models out of it. This method was helpful in order to represent my interests without any context around. In this way, the fragment of a facade became a physical material representation where metal, wood, concrete and textile meet together. In the process of making, one part of the model broke (fig. 13). Instead of having a piece of wood casted in plaster, the wood disappeared and let an imprint on the plaster. It made me realize that the idea of representing different meeting of textures, tactility and materiality could be done by using one single material.

- Finding materiality
I first did a serie of models with paper on the scale 1.20. I have used many different types of paper, with texture, different thickness, opacity in order to highlight some of my findings. I was more free in the making. I took some distance from the pictures and the reality of the site, and tried to interpretate some elements, by using my memory and looking at the components from my hand drawings. I have reproduced those models in order to cast with plaster. Suddenly, the model paper became a tool to cast and translate a partition wall into another materiality. Every single details has been print on the material, and it really allow to show every single detail. The casting method reinforced the idea of collecting memory.
Accidentale print of material
Fragment of a plaster model
Portera Manon (fig.13)
Serie of interior fragments
Paper model
scale 1:20 (fig.14)
Serie of material imprint
Plaster model
1:20 - no scale (fig.15)
Method

Use and translate

**Use** : The act of using something can be perceived as something that we take or consume from a limited supply. Or the action of using something. Or the state of being used for a purpose. The notion of «use» can be interpreted in different ways. From my point of view, the non physical use of a certain moment has a lot of value as well.

- **Use the site as a resource**
  I am using content, forms and aesthetics of sites, and I translate my findings into new architectural elements.

- **Use the context to recontextualize my findings**
  If we think about the becoming of the place, it will be a new construction coming in the following months. The method suggests to use this in between situation as an open area to find inspiration. Instead of proposing new construction with standard, basic materials and aesthetics, it would allow to bring a part of the previous construction through different forms. In order to contextualise my project, I have looked at the plan of the future construction and extracted an apartment floor plan.

- **Translation of the research into spatial narratives.**
  After working as a detective and gathering a collection of elements full of potentials, I'm suggesting ways of assembling things together, with a particular approach/sensitivity to details. Figures, forms are emerging via delicate variations of textures that creates a dynamic.
Use the site to contextualize
Line drawing (fig. 16)
Urban room + projection of the future construction
Method

Use and translate

The book Never Modern from Irénée Scalbert and 6a architect present the practice of the architects Tom Emerson and Stephanie Macdonald. I can relate their work to my approach when it comes to the focus on using the existing - the history of a place to find inspiration, unexpected details that make them exploring and experimenting to develop a new project.

A difficulty facing the architect is how to negotiate a past that concerns the detective and historian and a future that is of interest to the client and the occupants. (...) The way things are made can lead to a wider understanding of the city, of its culture and of its politics. 6a do not suscribe, however, to the view that architecture needs to make a statement. But they believe instead that architects make statements when they make things in a certain way as opposed to another.¹

¹ Irénée Scalbert and 6a architects, Never modern p 44; 72, 2013
For instance the lower end of a handrail at Raven Row terminates with a small flourish, a slight whoosh that hyphenates the seeing eye with the grabbing hand. There is pleasure in the use of it. There is a pleasure, too, in the making of it, as several wooden variants made in the office prior to its casting in bronze aluminium testify.

In addition, other things defy prediction and remain unknown to the architect: “the rest is out there, it’s not me, it’s not us, it’s available.”

Reference
Iréné Scalbert and 6a architects,
Never modern p 69, 2013 (fig. 17)
Method

Summarize

Looking at the different steps; the method can be compared to a cooking experimentation where a serie of ingredients are given to try different recipes, to eventually find the good combination. With this approach, the site is seen as an framework for experimentation where scales become unclear thanks to the decontextualization of some selected elements. It doesn’t propose to build a new project from nothing. I want to give importance to the context and build around it. The following abstract summarize how the components of a previous construction influence a design project through a serie of steps, including a range of spatial qualities as form, figures, proportions, structures, tactility, contrast....

Bloc of buildings

> Demolition

Traces from interiors are displayed outdoor
It become a serie of urban rooms
> Close analyse during a temporary period of availability

How to look at things?
> Take the time to analyse, observe, achieve, document

Collection of sites components

> Inspiration for the next construction
> Translation into new forms
> Take the scale down to the new interiors or details
Outcome

This project doesn't propose a final proposal in comparison to the interior architects practice. This is about exploring a way of working with a project. I have worked as a detective, trying to collect series of qualities from sites strongly connected to a previous use. Figures, forms, structures, proportions, rhythms, materials, textures, patterns, and details are displayed into one unique material. As a result of an exploration about using and translate finding in another aesthetic language.

I would say that I have a series of outcomes that compose the project.

- A book:
  Story telling about the project
  Including pictures, drawings, collages and text

- Models from material exploration (scale 1.20)

- Models (scale 1.5):
  Suggesting part of facades or interiors thanks to sign cut out of window, doors, corners. Most of the finding from my research are part of the those new models. For example the idea of a continuous material apply to a corner. A difference of deepness to define a door. Using simple forms but with some diagonales in order to add a dynamique to the space. Using a serie of different tactility that give a particularity to the space, in contrast to standard construction.
Translation into spatial narratives
Line drawing
Wall fragments of the appartment
Translation into spatial narratives
Plaster model
Wall fragments
Suggesting an interior
Collage
Portera Manon
Reflection

About the project

Thinking about my process, I had a lot of accidental results that helped me to take decision. It proved me that trying and making are important part of the process in order to improve, compare and question. It also relates to the accidental aesthetics of the sites that I’ve decided to work with. I found qualities were the unexpected details happened. I have learnt how to look at things differently in order to find new potentials.

This research helped to position my work in relation to the field of interior architecture today. The transition from the existing to the imprint communicate a way of dealing with the past. As interior architects, we are meant to dialogue with the built environment, and the way we choose to meet the challenge will affect the upcoming project. Extract qualities from the reading of those places has been an experimental working method that I could apply to larger context.

I thought about picking a site and make a project proposal for it. But on my way to do it, I realized that I was more interested in the method, and that I would lose the richness of possibilities. Instead of trying to solve technical issues of construction, I’ve spent time into the experimentation, exploration of findings, a serie of forms. But I’m thinking of keeping the method of my thesis project and bring it to my working practice where I’m gonna have to solve those issues. I’m curious about this details and I will continue to work with it.

This project has been a way to interrogates conventional way to conserve memory, looking at how to offer new alternatives to treat and rematerialize the past.
Reflection

About the exhibition

In the context of the exhibition, I’ve tried to represente my working method in the space. The idea is to offer an experience to the visitor, to make them part of the research. An archive of my research is displayed on a wall. It’s composed by a serie of drawings, pictures, models. Each column represent my findings though different types of representations. If people are interested about the subject, a book collecting the photographic work and translation in drawings is available to consult on a shelf. On a very low podium, a serie of plaster models are standing and are making an echo to the research, by using caracteristics of the site. They are displayed on a floor plan with the idea of suggesting space without making a finale proposal about a specific interior.
Appendix /

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