

The Journey to Antwerp: An Architectural Experience on Adaptive Reuse

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I was fortunate to travel with the eight faculty members from the Philippine Women's University (PWU) School of Fine Arts and Design and the School of Music. The grant provided by the Flemish government was one that I could not resist because the opportunity to experience life in Belgium is something that I always look forward to. In exchange, the journey should be significant in expressing my personal life in my artistic practice. As a designer, I have to immerse myself in a culture where individuals can express themselves through the visual outcomes they create. This travel narrative is similar to what Dr. Guillerma Mendoza shares about the industrial design discipline in her travels to South Korea, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom. Since this is my first trip to Belgium, the experience that I am referring to is our tour around the school, Sint Lucas Antwerpen. The students are free to express themselves in an immersive environment where the space allocation of their workspace is not confined to a specific area. The students are not dictated as to how big their work area is, but the movable panels make them decide to define their spaces.

We landed at Brussels Airport, then we rode a train to Antwerp. The first heritage building that made a lasting impression on me was the Antwerp Central Train Station. It is huge and extraordinary in the eyes of a designer. The high ceiling, curved elements, and grand stairways made me realize how preserved the building has been. This gave me the impression that we were headed for a heritage site.



Fig.1. Antwerp Central Train Station

The day after we had arrived, we were led to the school. The tour brought us a new way of creating ideas. On our way to school, the tram ride was scenic and inspiring. Heritage buildings are lined up along the street, and I could not help but take a shot of gorgeous structures. At school, the studio spaces are flexible based on how the students work on their projects. I realized that artistic research starts from one's interest; thus, the creation of art forms evolves based on how one understands the content behind a particular project.



Fig.2. Heritage Buildings in Antwerp, Belgium

On a personal level, the museum tour of an old church was an eye-opener. According to Plevoets and Cleempoel (2012), “working with existing buildings, repairing and restoring them for continued use has become a creative and fascinating challenge within the architectural discipline.” As a Catholic, I am sad knowing that the religion brought by our Spanish colonizers is slowly diminishing in this part of the world. In this light, Tugano (2022) mentions insights of how he viewed a more balanced perception of religion and museums in his travels. The church we visited is a familiar setting, and I regard the structure as sacred. All the characteristics of a Catholic church like the pulpit, altar, arched stained windows, and others are reminders of the Catholic churches here in the Philippines. Its location mentions a specific address Kunsthal Extra City - Church, Provinciestraat 112, 2018 Antwerpen. The link listed in the bibliography of this travelogue shows the church's facade which resembles a Gothic church, with the familiar characteristic of the architectural elements as shown by the pointed arches.



Fig.3. Old Church Turned into a Museum

Regarding the topic discussed, adaptive reuse is an alternative to preserving old structures, but Catholic churches should be considered sacred to me. As a designer, artistic research is significant in this journey because a thorough examination of cultural differences

considers nonnormative ways of expressing one's observations through narrative forms. The meaning behind the creation of a building is something that one should take into consideration. Although I intend to study residential houses in the Philippines, I am moved by the fact that the beautiful edifices in Antwerp are preserved well and that reusing them for a different purpose should not include Catholic Churches. The social context is based on the structure's original purpose, intended for a group of worshippers. The structure is identified with sacred ceremonies done to worship God to whom believers of the Catholic faith hold on to.

Aside from the museum tours, I was mesmerized by a wonderful tourist destination called Brugges, which we visited on the weekend. We took a two-hour train ride and I observed that the single detached houses are situated in the countryside. Brugges is appealing because there are beautiful edifices along a canal where boat rides are available. Souvenir shops are all over the place, thus the chance to shop. The experience was awesome knowing that the chance was once in a lifetime. As a designer, I still wonder at the possibility of how spaces of the old buildings will be reused. I could not visit all the buildings at close range but seeing them at a distance was something I needed to do for the travelogue. I observed that some old buildings had restaurants at the ground floor level.



Fig. 4. Heritage Buildings, The Canal and Shopping Areas at Brugges, Belgium

The last leg of our stay in Antwerp was productive because I visited the Zaha Hadid Building with the other three colleagues. The design of the building is a combination of an old structure and a form enclosed with glass. The modern building takes the shape of a boat-like structure over an old building. The description from the link in the bibliography of this travelogue mentions that “These three key principles define the design’s composition of new and old: a new volume that ‘floats’ above the old building, respecting each of the old facades and completing the verticality of the original design’s unrealized tower”. Beauty emanates from the form created right above an old building. The form seems to float above an old building, which simulates the shape of a jewel most popularly called a diamond, of which Antwerp is identified. I realized that Zaha Hadid, had a strong sense of creativity because combining a jewel-like form with an old building rarely happens. That is how incredible the form is.



Fig. 5. Zaha Hadid Building at Antwerp, Belgium

The meaning behind every building at Antwerp provides me with a renewed perspective on how a designer sees the future of a building. The designers of well-preserved old buildings gave me a renewed sense of responsibility, where the original structure stands firm despite the changes in time. A sacred edifice like a Gothic church turned into a museum gave me a grim peek into reality. The display of art which does not connect to the original design intent of the structure was not enlightening because of the reuse of the building that is not related to religious activities. As a designer, a residence can be turned into an office building. On the other hand, an office building can turn into a restaurant at the ground floor level. However, the reuse of a church is assigned to religious organizations who should decide on the church's preservation.

Faro and Miceli (2019) maintain that non-governmental European organizations like FRH, Future for Religious Heritage, exist to raise awareness about preserving religious assets. The heritage sites at Antwerp are visually appealing to me. I realized that these organizations may play significant roles in keeping a built environment alive for a long period. The thought of knowing that the Catholic faith was introduced to the Filipino people by the Spaniards, I am glad that its existence is powerful in the Philippines. The Catholic belief is a gift to the Filipino people whether it was passed on by our colonizers or not. The Catholic faith is a guiding path for Catholic believers in this lifetime, thus holding on to it is a steadfast challenge towards eternal happiness. Large churches are considered heritage assets, especially in Taal, Batangas, Iloilo, and other parts of the Philippines. They are well preserved knowing that parishioners come in multitude and that there is no need for the reuse of these sacred edifices. It is a relief to know that the Filipino culture is hybrid. With the aforementioned topic of adaptive reuse, I am holding on to the firm desire to take the creative part of me in a direction, where the meaning behind an edifice is significant because of the users of the space. As a designer, the decision to build a structure with the users as a priority spells the longevity of its existence in a built environment.

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