

*caption for the image: Guido Guidi, *Per strada* (dintorni 1985-1990).

Back to the street

Master dissertation studio MAIB42

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The *street* is the most essential and ordinary form of urban configuration. And nevertheless, its functions are extremely open and complex. The main constitutive feature of our everyday lives, the street is a mediating and liminal space between sky and earth, public and private, in and out, close and far, here and there, means and end, possibility and danger, freedom and containment, celebration and protest, separation and unity, people and technology, us and others. The street is a public space that gives access to what exists around and along it and can be framed by buildings, facades or can run across an open landscape. Streets are spaces for rituals, togetherness, but also fight. Streets are 'spaces of appearance' but also spaces of control, power displays, and conflict. In many parts of Europe, streets remain lively spaces and the most prominent arena for public life. Street is the place where ordinary life is staged with both its hopes and burdens. Streets are the place of long travel and fatigue, places of work and rest, places of conviviality and socializing, places of trade and exchange, places of civil and political rallying, but also places of prostitution and exclusion. Streets are strongly embedded in each country's long and recent history, collective memory, and temporality. For this reason, the street is one of the most tangible forms of public and common space and, it can be argued, the very constitutive element of the city. Without streets, there is simply no city. The street is therefore a space that is ordinary and yet the most important theatre of our collective life.

Despite its importance, today we lack a coherent architectural project about the street. Contemporary architecture and urban design are more focused on objects rather than on the space around or alongside them. Streets are often considered as the default space in between buildings with no spatial integrity on their own. Despite being the most common landscape of our daily lives, the street is the least discussed artefact within the culture of design. For this reason, as the first of a series of investigations that over the next few years will try to rethink one by one forgotten urban artefacts (the street, but also the allotments, the settlement etc.), this design studio goes back to the architecture of the street – where street is the foreground object of architecture and not the background to other objects. The interest of the studio is specifically geared towards the possibility of re-opening the project of the street as a coherent project at the scale of the city or the territory. While many countries have renounced to a vision for their cities and for their territories, the studio looks to the street as the starting point for the advancement of a new urban and territorial vision to be enhanced starting from the design of the street. By focusing on this single element, the studio aims to propose no less than a visionary urban or territorial strategy that brings together spatial and social analysis with design culture. Such a project should not be intended as a top-down vision, nor about the possibility of tracing new streets, but primarily about valorising existing conditions and building up on those opportunities related to the changing ways in which streets will be used in the future.

Research framework

The studio is the first iteration of a longer design-research trajectory that will be developed over the next few years and aiming towards the drafting of a new manual of Urban design.

This, rather than containing new urban forms and urban typologies, would be based on the comprehensive transformation of what is already existing. One of the big challenges for Urban design over the next decades is to remedy to the processes of urbanization of the past, rather than coming up with new models from scratch. What we need the most are strategies and guidelines for the gradual retrofitting of what is already there and that would be able to transform the existing built environment into a more just, socially inclusive, environmentally responsible and affordable inhabitable place. While similar endeavours have already been undertaken at the scale of the building or of construction material, it is crucial to focus also on the urban dimension since there is an absolute lack of alternative urban paradigms to the *status quo*. To do this, the studio will focus each year on one of those forgotten and neglected urban artefacts and typologies (such as the street, the allotments, the settlement, the business and industrial parks etc.) that are the primary embodiment of past urbanization processes. The revision of each of these urban artefacts or typology will be done by reconsidering the ways in which these were traditionally envisioned, namely as the embodiment of an idea of life organised through the spatial separation of the four functions of housing, working, recreation and traffic. Bypassing such separation seems necessary to come up with urban artefacts that can address the ways in which we live today.

Site

Each student participating in the studio will be asked to select a street to work on, with case studies expected to range between pedestrian paths and motorways, commercial strips and monumental axes. Paradigmatic streets can be selected in Flanders, in the Brussels Capital Region, in students' country of origin or in the country where the student will be spending his or her winter semester. While there is no preclusion towards any case study, the choice needs to take into consideration issues related to accessibility to resources and the possibility of conducting fieldwork even in the event of a recurring pandemic.

Studio organization

The studio is organised in two parts, each corresponding to one of the two semesters of the academic year. During the winter semester, each student will explore a research theme related to an assigned case-study through different research methods. An essential reader and bibliographical resources will be provided at the start of the semester. During this period, each student will also select a street to work on during the second semester. Ideally a four-days field trip will be organised at the start of February 2021, if the current pandemic allows for. The second semester is fully dedicated to the development of the project. In this period teaching activities include weekly tutorials, field-work, internal seminars, lectures by invited guests and reviews with external guests.