REVITALIZING THE PUBLIC SPACES IN SOCIAL HOUSING:
An experimental approach to revitalize the positive vibes in the public spaces of Landlust by integrating circulation routes with communal gardens

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1. Aim of the Reflection Report

In this reflection report, I will review my master thesis in different aspects. The focus is twofolds – “how” and “why”. First I will look back to my research and design process. This includes the methods, references, theories and case studies I used, the translation of my research conclusions to preliminary design concepts and the development to design details. Next, I will reflect on the social relevance of my project in post-war social housing in Amsterdam-West and the wider context.

I will cover the following aspects: the relationship between the theme of my project and the Heritage and Architecture studio, my research and design, the method I used and the methodical line of approach of H&A studio, my project and the wider social context. Theme refers to my design topic and scale of project. Method refers to the tools, references, theories and case studies I used in my graduation. Social context refers to the implication of my design in other context and how my design can be used to different extents, in particular, the possibility of application of my interventions in other monumental housing complex in the Netherlands.

2. My project and theme of Heritage and Architecture graduation studio

Many existing social housing in the Netherlands built in the early 20th century requires an upgrade for different reasons. Old concepts of social living are no longer suitable for people’s current living. I believe that Landlust in Amsterdam-West is in need of a new approach to improve its current state of social stability and social interactions so that the equilibrium of individual privacy and collective living is compromised. I would like to interfere the public spaces of existing social housing to create a harmonious community by architectural means. I think the environment and living qualities can be improved in such social housing if new interventions are made to the existing building to reach the contemporary standards and future comfort without destroying the positive elements in the past and existing building. This is also one of my reasons to choose the Heritage and Architecture studio.

The fundamental task in the H&A studio is to find the appropriate balance between the old and the new, then to create contemporary design for the transformation of existing buildings. Preservation and renewal in existing architecture is the concern. The approach for the H&A studio is to deal with the relationship between cultural history, technology and design. The studio focused on different reuse concepts. In the first semester, a series of lectures on value assessment from the studio allowed me to learn different ways to reuse existing buildings. These reuse concepts are developed based on the study of the cultural-historical values of old buildings. Reuse of existing buildings could be reuse of the building concept, reuse of the plot, reuse of the material, reuse of the skin or reuse of the plan.

I see the opportunity to reuse different parts of the existing building of Landlust and transform it into a contemporary design for the future. Landlust has a semi-opened building form that is very common in the Netherlands. Being a municipal monument in Amsterdam-West, Landlust in Bos en Lommer District, Amsterdam-West has been a social housing for minimum income households since 1936. Landlust was designed by Merkelbach (1901-1961) and built in 1936. Although each site varies to different extent, I think finding a way to
improve this housing monument in Landlust is not only beneficial to this particular project, it is also useful in coming up with a more generic solution for other Dutch social housing. Thus, I would like to experiment with new architectural concepts specifically for Landlust first and then to reflect on whether all or parts of my design ideas are relevant under different circumstances.

The design of Landlust was based on Western Garden Cities idea in which the site was surrounded by a large amount of greeneries. With the design motto ‘Light, Air and Space’, Merkelbach’s goal was to incorporate strips of green in between building blocks for recreational and leisure purposes. He wanted to give equal opportunities to all residents to use the public spaces by creating a central courtyard for communal activities. (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2014) At the beginning stage of the brief analysis of the site, including history, appearances, cultural values, interior, construction and building technology of Landlust, I think Merkelbach’s design to incorporate the garden cities idea in the social housing for the working class was so explicit and essential that should be glorified and transformed into nowadays use. (fig 1) During my first site visit to Landlust, I was affirmed to take up this design theme to improve existing social stability and living conditions of Landlust by intervening the greenery in the public spaces because I saw the possible problems and potential improvement of the green spaces in the courtyard and around the site.

fig 1. The site is covered with greeneries in the past and now
3. Research and Design

The first impression I had about Landlust was that the greenery within the courtyard was beautiful with a large piece of grass planted with trees. However, it was not possible to enter the courtyard on the ground floor because of the closed gates at two ends. (fig 2-4) The courtyard became a semi-public space that could only be used by residents. Yet, it was not being used at all time so I wondered what were the reasons for this. Hence, I started to conduct my research on the semi-public and public spaces related to greeneries in Landlust. My ultimate goal was to improve the current state of the courtyard which lacked of visual connection and physical accessibility with the residential units and the public streets, then to revitalize the public spaces in Landlust by redesigning the circulation in Landlust.

Looking back to my initial decision to focus on the public green spaces and circulation in Landlust, I realized it was possible that by focusing on these two elements - green and paths, the social cohesion in Landlust could be fostered in a passive way. The safety in the public spaces could be improved with my design concepts to integrate communal spaces with additional external walkways that connected the front door of all dwellings with the streets in an open structure so that the routes were surveilled by both residents of Landlust and nearby buildings, as well as pedestrian on streets. Since the communal spaces in Landlust were the
most prominent part in my project, I spent a lot of time in the study of possible ways to make the courtyard more interesting by reading many case studies and theories. There was a period in my design process that I focused on the addition of new programs such as shops and restaurants on ground floor, rooftop sports ground, water pools for children, extra pavilions in courtyard, farming and performance stages. (fig 5) I tried to include all these activities in my project in an attempt to make the courtyard more interesting to use. Later, I revisited the site in April 2016 when the site was already under construction and the courtyard was completely rebuilt and paved with concrete floors, I realized the green atmosphere and initial design concept of Merkelbach would be lost if I placed all these interventions in the courtyard. And that would contradict with my conclusion in the value assessment that the garden city idea was the main element to be kept. With the concept in mind that the greeneries in the existing site processed a high cultural-historical value, I decided to step back and designed the public spaces in a less ambitious way. The final design still included an intervention to the central courtyard space and the greenery along the Juliana van Stolbergstraat and Louise de Colignystraat but the overall appearance remained green. I was glad that I made this improvement because I realized adding new program to existing site was not the only way to make the courtyard safe to use. I found out the most appropriate solution was to make use of the new external walkways to increase the involvement in the green spaces, either through walking and watching it on a daily basis or actually using the public spaces as a social gathering place.

![fig 5. Intermediate design with additional program in the courtyard](image)
Through the whole design process, I noticed the importance of the research in providing strong evidence for my design strategies and this was not a linear process. The research in the public spaces of Landlust was based on theories, historical records and future planning policies of Amsterdam-West. When I started to find solutions to the problems I found in the existing public spaces, I needed more research such as case studies to support my design ideas. Yet, research on case studies was not straightforward too. This was because there was no built project that had all the design elements I had in my concept. Therefore, I had to search for projects that had one or more ideas similar to mine, then to test whether these design solutions in other projects were suitable to be applied in Landlust. Hence, research and design ran parallel throughout my design process. And it was a positive step to go back to research conclusions from time to time to reflect whether my design agreed or disagreed with the conclusions I made in previous stage.

4. Methodical line of approach between my project and H&A studio

My design goal is to improve social stability in Landlust through the interventions to the existing greeneries. I had to find the architectural tools to develop that would result in the enhancement of public spaces in Landlust. The methodology of H&A studio followed the “research by design” approach. Thus, I started to research on the history and cultural significance of circulation, connection and program of the site in order to make a conclusion in the value assessment and then to find appropriate design solutions. I studied the green spaces in the existing site and compared it with the green spaces in the past. I found out the public spaces in Landlust was not being used as frequently than before. So I tried to find reasons for that. I found out that the courtyard is no longer as safe as before because of the lack of entrances and inconvenient accessibility nowadays whereas the courtyard was opened to the public in the past. It was also due to a change in societal concept that most women were housewives and they spent most of their time in the kitchen in the 1930s. They would then look into the courtyard when they worked in the balcony. Nowadays, people seldom look into the courtyard that made it a less safe place to use. Thus, I understood that improving the safety in the public spaces of Landlust is one of my design goals. This illustrated the importance of the method outlined by H&A studio that through the study of architectural history, ethical and intangible values of the site, a suitable design direction could be defined.

In addition, Landlust has been renovated two times after being built in 1936 as evidenced by historical images (Beeldbank, 2015). So the original design of Merkelbach has been modified to the existing state. This is a very important part to examine because the degree of modifications allows me to evaluate the historical values of this housing monument. Thus, I formulated my research question to be what are the strengths and weaknesses in the design and use of existing public spaces in Landlust in relation to its historical and cultural significance. My research method started with a brief study of the site, observation during site visits, readings of historical images from Beeldbank, drawings from Stadarchief and documents from Gemeente Amsterdam. From these, I built up my own perspectives of public spaces in Landlust and the corresponding reasons.
Next, I used theories of architects and urbanists on modern planning to support my arguments on public spaces in Landlust so that my opinion was not merely personal observations, but supported by professional studies. Since the theories by architects are not conducted for Landlust in the context of Amsterdam-West and they were not written in recent years, I consulted the statistics and future policies of the Municipality of Amsterdam and compared with the theories of urban planning. This aimed to proof that my observation and theories by urban planners were applicable in Landlust. In reflection, I found out that this method of including theories, statistics and future policies to be successful. It allowed me to come up with research conclusions on public spaces in Landlust that were evidence-based. So the research conclusions represented my own interpretation of public spaces in Landlust. The conclusions I made were not just my personal views but also a critical judgment of the existing site. (fig 6)

In parallel, I also analyzed aspects other than public spaces in Landlust, such as interior, aesthetics, construction, building technology, etc. This was because I saw the public spaces in Landlust as the continuation and extension of the private spaces. They were not separate entities. A value assessment was made according to the authenticity and cultural significance of each element. As emphasized by the H&A studio, this step was crucial. The value assessment of the existing site gave me an idea of what could be demolished in the existing monument, what should be refurbished and what should be preserved.

The research was the fundamental part in the whole research and design process because all preliminary ideas were based on my research conclusions. During the elaboration of preliminary ideas, I searched for built examples worldwide to proof my ideas could be realized. However, every project was unique and I could not find projects that are similar to my preliminary design concepts. In P2 presentation, I was told that my preliminary design was
slightly ambitious that required study of more cases. I was also advised to look at more built examples, especially in the context of the Netherlands. Hence, with the help and recommendations of my tutors, I found many examples in the Netherlands and worldwide that had partial similar qualities with my preliminary design. For instances, the building complex in Hoogvliet, Rotterdam (2007) had a transitional zone of private gardens on the ground floor and an opened corridor on the first and second floor, the 8 House (2010) built by BIG in Copenhagen had an outdoor path that connect all residential units with the ground floor and the roof. I believed that with such a route in Landlust, the safety in the circulation paths in Landlust could be improved. In my preliminary design, I wanted to carved out voids in the building to create communal gardens for social living, the Gifu Apartment in Tokyo (1994) designed by SANAA also had these voids for gardens. I studied the advantage and limit of these projects. (fig 7-9) They became inspirations for my next design stage – the development of my preliminary ideas.

Then, here came the period when I struggled most. I wanted to take up the challenge to design an experimental project that could be realized. I spent a lot of time in designing the project to be more realistic. Then I went too much into this realistic design that six weeks after P2, I noticed that my design started to lose some positive qualities in my preliminary design. I recognized the risks of neglecting the historical and cultural values of the existing building. Thus, I looked back to my research again and compared my design with the value assessment and conclusions I made previously. Eventually, I decided to take a better balance between preservation and transformation.
It was a tough period because I had to reconsider my design and at the same time continued to develop my project into more details. It also took me a few weeks to figure out a better solution for the circulation in my design. Since my project was fairly complicated, it definitely required some time to resolve the difficulties in my design. The development process after P2 was not executed smoothly but looking back at my research conclusions regularly helped me to find the appropriate design direction. I learned that the design method could not be just a linear process. I learned that it involved going back and changing direction. I also learned to make decisions carefully and perhaps at an earlier stage. Sometimes, problems in the design could only be seen when the design is developed into more details. Therefore, I understood the usefulness of a non-linear design process.

5. My design and the wider social context

It was a very meaningful task to follow the H&A graduation studio and learnt to preserve and transform old buildings into sustainable ones. The H&A studio guided me to consider the cultural significance of the existing site in all design steps. I learnt about the difficulties in the design of restoration projects in particular the balance between the existing and new. Since many existing housing in the Netherlands possess similar building form as Landlust, I think finding a way to improve the public spaces in Landlust is not only beneficial to this particular project, but it is also useful in coming up with a more generic solution for Dutch social housing. In many post-war housing in the Netherlands, the building blocks are all surrounded by gardens and courtyards. My design idea of integrating the communal gardens with the circulation route can potentially transform these post-war housing complexes into a very nice neighbourhood.

New circulation route:
In the existing buildings, the staircase to each resident unit was indoor with poor light conditions and transparency. (fig 10-11) As Jacobs suggested, these spaces were like dead-end in the corridors where crimes could happen. (Jacobs, 1961) Although the staircase in Landlust was not a dangerous spot and only a small number of youth problems such as nuisances were found, the safety in the circulation paths could be improved with my design strategy. By placing external elevated walkways in the courtyard, the stair would be always watched by other neighbours, as well as strangers on the streets. In the existing situation, each pair of scissors stairs was only connected to eight units. (fig 12) The chances of meeting each other were minimal, let alone the chances to develop into a stable community. Therefore, my design strategy could foster social interactions among neighbours. Since social interaction was an important cultural habit of ethnic groups who lived there, it would be an improvement to cater the needs of these people by providing them spaces for gatherings in small groups. These small social gatherings could happen in the communal gardens along the new paths on a daily basis instead of the existing dark and narrow staircase. The design of a continuous path that circulated from the ground floor to the roof can be applicable to other social housing in the Netherlands, especially in building areas where safety is a problem to be solved. By merging the communal gardens with the circulation route, it became easier and convenient for residents to participate in public spaces and gardens. This would be particularly useful in districts where the non-Dutch communities live because young girls were vulnerable in public spaces, stated by the Municipality of Amsterdam. So with a new circulation route, possibilities for social contact with neighbours were given and safety was improved. Reflect on this design
idea, I also saw limit in this new circulation route. Although the external corridor was offset to create a distance between the corridor and the dwellings, the stair will block part of the views.

fig 10-11. Existing staircase cannot be seen from outside

fig 12. Each pair of scissor stairs is shared by 8 units

Different types of green spaces:
Following the garden city idea of Merkelbach, the site is covered with grass and trees. However, the green spaces did not have other purposes except for views. I think it would be a nice environment if the green spaces had more functions such as private gardens and collective gardens. Based on the research and the statistics of Gemeente Amsterdam, the population of ethnic groups, i.e. Moroccans, Turks and Surinamese in Amsterdam-West consisted of almost 40% of the population. (fig 13) They have the cultural habits of gatherings in small groups with people of similar background and nationalities. They like to gather in a less public place. Therefore, by adding smaller communal gardens in the building complex, they could use these spaces in a safe manner and in a more private condition than the central courtyard. This design idea could be extended to other social housing in the Netherlands where the concept of communal living is present.
fig 13. The percentage of ethnic groups in the population in Landlust is higher than in Amsterdam

**Green spaces in urban scale:**
In the future plan of Bos en Lommer area, the Municipality of Amsterdam also stated that in the coming years they would like to improve the public spaces in Amsterdam-West. It was stated that the green spaces were not fully utilized. One of their suggested solutions was to integrate various small parks into a continuous strip or a big area of parks and that would include more interesting program such as children’s playing facilities and places for sports and leisure. (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2015) Therefore, I think the circulation routes in my design can possibly be extended to the adjacent building blocks to form one big network with communal gardens. Fig 14 shows the amount of public and private green spaces in the existing site whereas fig 15 shows the amount of public and private green spaces after my intervention. This is coherent with the idea of the Municipality of Amsterdam that this can improve the safety in parks and gardens and in a broader sense, maximize chances of social interaction and integration of the ethnic minorities into the Dutch community through the intervention of urban planning and architecture.

fig 14. Existing urban plan  
fig 15. Urban plan after intervention  
(light green indicates private green spaces and dark green indicates public green spaces)
Living under green conditions in the city:
Nowadays, sustainability is the biggest goal of different fields in the society. In architecture, more emphasizes are made to increase the comfort of indoor and outdoor living and working environment. One of the strategies is to add more roof gardens, terraces and communal outdoor spaces. (Wines, 2000) I see the benefits of my design to include sustainability in the circulation routes that people will use these gardens on a regular or daily basis. They do not have to travel to suburban areas to enjoy green environment. Starting with post-war housing and other housing monuments in the Netherlands, sustainability can be achieved through intervention of existing buildings.

6. Conclusion
In the whole process of the thesis, I encountered various challenges. With the clear direction in the H&A studio, I learnt to appreciate the cultural significance of monumental housing. A balance between preservation and transformation is required. I understood that by conducting a value assessment of the existing building, including the history, building concepts, materials, aesthetics, construction, interior, etc, appropriate solutions for demolition, restoration, modification and transformation can be made. Research by design methodology allowed me to develop a design that was evidence-based. I learnt that research and design is never a linear process. Although my design strategies were ambitious and experimental in Dutch social housing, I saw the extent where they can be applied in different circumstances. I was satisfied with the final results. Last but not least, I was glad that I chose this studio and worked on this housing monument.

References

