

# *Personal Reflection*

TU Delft : Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences | Explorelab

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## **Introduction to the process of the project**

My project originated from a deeply personal fascination with textiles, a curiosity to learn more about their history in relation to feminist history, and an eagerness to explore their applications within architectural design. In this way, this project is characterized by an intersectional approach to architecture, which purpose is to challenge the societally imposed binaries of art and craft, male and female, public and private.

In brief, my research stems from the fact that textiles – and women as masters of this craft – historically held a pivotal role within society, thus reclaiming the value of this craft is also recognizing the role of women's contribution to culture. The underlying hierarchy which places the male/public/art domains as superior to the female/domestic/craft domains, has resulted in the oppression of important narratives. Furthermore, the division of the public and private spheres limited women's participation in the former and confined them to the latter, inevitably making this a spatial issue.

Departing from the posed problem, I formulated the following research questions:

### Main question

*How can textiles be used as a form of storytelling in architecture through which to reclaim female authorship and agency?*

### Sub-questions

- How do present day women act as storytellers through the making of textiles?*
- How do their stories echo those of the women before them?*
- What is the relation between texts (storytelling), textiles (material), and space (architecture) in current times?*

My research called for a method that was equally personal and diverse, and that allowed for qualitative research that can span across multiple contexts, temporalities, and disciplines. For all that, my research consisted of Participatory Narrative Inquiry through craft circles as its primary method, supplemented by literature review. As an outcome, I interweaved the different stories I collected into an anthology of around twenty-five stories.

Based on my research, my proposal took shape as a reimagined memorial located at the inner courtyard and adjacent alleyway of the Spinhuis building in Amsterdam. With a program containing a gallery, a workshop, and an artist's residency, it is a reclaimed space dedicated to making. With a structure that combines a light steel frame, adjustable curtain rods, and overlaid textiles, the building acts as an open exhibition space for the community.

## **Reflection on the translation of the research into the design proposal**

Translating my research into an architectural problem and design proposal was the main challenge of my project. Its very purpose was finding a way to turn something that is not inherently architectural (textile making and storytelling), into an explicit architectural expression. By collecting as many stories as I could during the research phase, and then textually weaving them into new stories for the anthology, I was able to find repeating themes and messages that would act as guidelines for what I needed my design intervention to evoke. At the moment of setting up and carrying out my design objectives, I also had to make sure that even the more metaphorical conclusions of my research were expressed through the choices I made with respect to location, structure, program, and materiality.

Finding the right location for my design intervention was another challenge, as it was very important for me that its context could express this list of requirements, all the while without feeling forced. The main problem here was that my research didn't directly point me towards a location, but rather towards the conditions that my location should have.

I eventually chose my project location to be the courtyard and alleyway surrounding Spinhuis in Amsterdam. A historical monument just a block away of the booming red-light district, the Spinhuis was a reformation house for criminal women founded in the 16th century, where the punishment consisted of spinning and sewing. Nowadays, the building hosts a research centre for the university of Amsterdam, with almost no visible trace of its past left. My decision to choose this location ultimately came from the fact that I saw reflections of my research converging in this space.

The guidelines that grounded me in the process of connecting my research to my design, and the design choices that came with them, are the following:

- i. The design proposal must be an infiltration of the public sphere. Stemming from the objective of blurring the perception of public and domestic spaces, I decided to place my intervention within the existing courtyard of the Spinhuis, and along its alleyway. The scaffolding structure which stitches together the facades of the Spinhuis with those of the Houses on the other side of the alley create an in between space that cannot be directly perceived as either inside or outside. Using scaffolding and textiles, the building is expressed as both open and closed. The alley and courtyard, though disrupted by the scaffolding structure, is still free to access.
- ii. It voices a message of resistance. Considering the history of the context in which the intervention is located, the reclaiming of this space under a new premise is in a way an act of resistance. What once was a space for punishing women, locked within the walls of the

Spinhuis and stripped of their agency, the intervention now offers a free space in which to exert that agency. From an architectural standpoint, the design also expresses resistance through its very form, appearing as an almost parasitic structure in relation to the structures surrounding it. It attempts to instigate visual conflict by carrying a material expression that is light and airy, contrasting with the dense, heavy masonry constructions around it.

- iii. A space for commemorating and memorializing silenced narratives. The design should bring light to parts of history that are continuously marginalized. Again, emphasising that the history of the women of the Spinhuis is almost completely erased from the existing physical space, my intention through this intervention is to bring the attention back to this space. Furthermore, my proposal for a facade in which to hang textile panels hand-made by its users is also my attempt to turn a building's facade into an informal exhibition space. The facade in combination with textiles acts as a medium for storytelling.
- iv. Both its making and program should reflect community. The design intervention attempts to honour the communal characteristic behind the textile crafts, in both form and function. In its physical expression, from skeleton, to skin, to atmosphere, it offers the possibility to be directly influenced by its users. In terms of program, it opens up the currently closed courtyard to serve as a public space for the community, as well as hosts spaces for gathering and collective making.
- v. It is atemporal. It makes no direct reference to a specific time and has the capacity to stitch together multiple points in time. The use of scaffolding and the layering of textiles to create varying degrees of transparency were design choices I made to make the structure a metaphorical ghost. The use of scaffolding is also linked to the process of building and restoration, indicating a work in progress or a pause in time. The connection to its surroundings brings up stories of the past, but the spaces of making coupled with the changing facade elements also allow for stories of the present to share the same space.

## Reflections on ways of making

My process throughout this project has been a constant confrontation with craftsmanship. From the subject of my research to the methodologies, and all throughout the design process, crafting has interweaved itself along the way.

In the beginning, my fascination towards the history of textiles led me to learn and reflect on how we have societally marginalized certain ways of making, attaching hierarchies and meanings to them. The separation of art from craft, with its relations to patriarchal structures and spatial demarcations was particularly fascinating to reflect on as I relate it to my personal experience. As a woman pursuing my professional education within a discipline previously denied to my gender, and with a passion for a craft that holds so much history and meaning for the history of women, I found myself gaining an awareness for the value that materials carry in conjunction to how they make the spaces that surround us. I also found myself thinking about how often architecture is taught and practiced from what we think is a position of objectivity, perhaps naively unaware or maybe just bodily detached from the reality that architecture is a subjective practice. To design from this false notion of objectivity often results in the erasure of important narratives and ways of making.

Furthermore, this project was also an exercise on challenging traditional expectations by blurring the line between art and craft. My design did not originate from an explicitly architectural problem, nor did it intend to solve one. Instead, my purpose was how a problem revolving around craftsmanship, culture, material, and female agency, could be translated into an architectural

expression. As far as an intervention goes, it does not seek to alleviate any functional spatial issues present in its context. If anything, it chooses to disrupt it. It isn't convenient, but its design does fulfil its purpose to be both a functional and sculptural object, placing it in the convergence of art and craft. With this I also conclude that as an architect, I am reassured in my position that architecture is a discipline inseparable from both art and craft, and that its value resides in being both an object of function and an object of contemplation.