

Research Plan:

URBAN PARAPHRASING: EMPTINESS

[URBAN VOIDS]

an urban element possess a liberating potential,
a possibility of moving beyond established social
values

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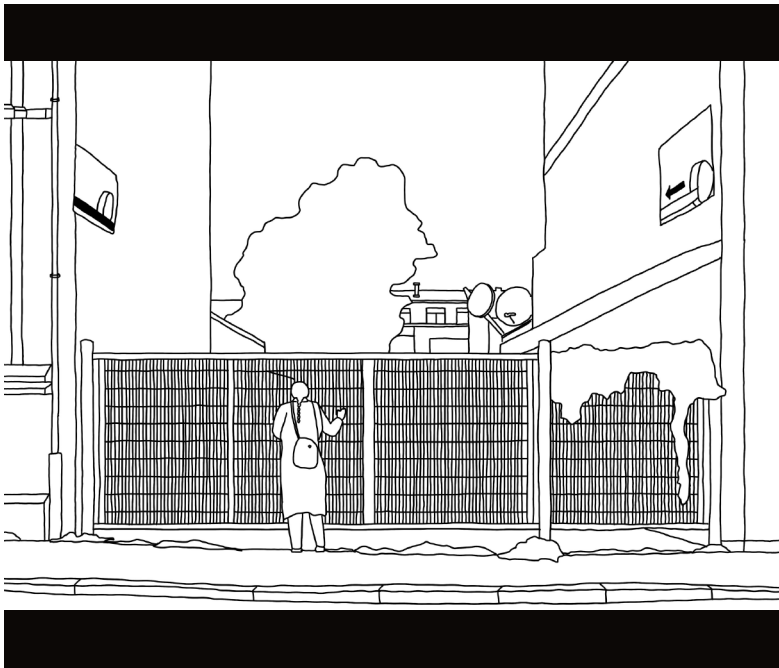


Fig. 1

‘the space’ in-between things, between objects and subjects,
between my house and my neighbors, between their office
and mine, is traversed by many strangers, and is not a
meeting space; it has become ‘empty’ because it plays no
recognizable role

(Gust, Ghent Urban Studies Team, 1999)

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INTRODUCTION

THE DISPERSED NEIGHBOURHOOD

The neighborhood of Bressoux is in a phenomenon of dispersion. Tangibly, the fragmented building blocks, the incoherence of facade materials, spontaneous voids scatter in between the cluster and unidentifiable industrial structure in the settlement; these elements reveal the inharmonious urban fabric as a product of patchworking. Meanwhile, from the intangible social perspective, the shutter screen for the openings, the double fence for the entrance, and the absence of front yard in the neighborhood, convey a clear boundary between private and public domain, detaching the locals from public life. This phenomenon could relate back to the notion of ‘decomposed contemporary society’ coined by Bernardo Secchi, emphasizing urban void, which derived from the sprawled settlement pattern in the postwar era, as a notable urban element inducing missing links and inept definitions in the city. Thereby, the formation of dispersed neighborhoods and voids possess an indivisible relationship.

‘the space’ in-between things, between objects and subjects, between my house and my neighbors, between their office and mine, is traversed by many strangers, and is not a meeting space; it has become ‘empty’ because it plays no recognizable role (Secchi, 1993)

Generally, urban voids are often perceived as wastelands, depict with a negative connotation due to the nature of ‘emptiness’ and the unproductive environment. In the period from the 1960s to the mid-1990s, emptiness was always considered as a spatial and social urban problem that should be resolved, and the spatial quality in these vacant spaces was not accommodated by both the

city and the public (López-Piñeiro, 2020a). Nonetheless, by considering the term alternatively, some scholars identify that the voids per se possess a liberating potential, a possibility of moving beyond established social values (Gust, Ghent Urban Studies Team, 1999), which other parts of the city could not provide. The dichotomous identity of urban voids fascinated my interest to further investigate the hidden potential and spatial quality. In my research, I would like to explore the potential of polishing urban voids as a hidden gem, transforming it from an urban segregation element to a city reconnecting component.



Fig. 2 Incoherence of Facade Design



Fig. 3 Incoherence of Facade Materials



Fig. 4 Fragmented Building Blocks



Fig. 5 Fragmented Building Blocks



Fig. 6 Shutter Screen for Openings



Fig. 7 Double Fence for Entrance

THE POTENTIAL OF URBAN VOIDS

‘EMPTINESS’ AS SPATIAL QUALITY

‘Emptiness’ is a substantial nature that could be observed from the urban voids, and hence it could be embodied as a synthesis of spatial quality. The expression of void does not mean a literal vacuum, yet it is referring to the emptiness in both space and expectation (López-Piñeiro, 2020b). The notion of emptiness could be perceived and defined according to two layers: external level and internal level. Referring to the external level, the voids are a lack of value towards the capital, real estate value, efficacy, and production aspect (López-Piñeiro, 2020b). On the other hand, Stefano Boeri suggests the voids are inherent with multiple presences of codes, which leads to the superimposition of information or even clashing and destruction (Boeri, 1998). Since the void is hypocodified with an excessive number of interpretative codes, it is impossible to identify and endow a recognizable role to the space (Boeri, 1998). Thereby, these vague places reflect a phenomenon of emptiness. Nonetheless, these qualities of emptiness give rise to a sense of marginality due to the absence of values. In consequence, these voids are empowered with sensibilities and opportunities, which are also able to foster the emergence of publicness dissimilar from other orthodox public spaces.

Spontaneous / Self-initiative /
Indeterminate / Unintended / Liberated /
Derelict

These key terms are also part of the unique quality extracted from the urban voids, meanwhile, they are also crucial factors in provoking publicness in a public realm. Referring back to the orthodox public space, it is often expected with

appropriate behaviors and activities, the space is planned and regulated that filter out the public in an arbitrary manner. The public space in the current urbanscape is less inclusive than we expect.

what makes a place public is democratic control over that space, therefore the willingness to allow a space to host sometime contentious public (Deusen & Mitchell, 2001)

The urban voids have the ability to become an alternate public space, accommodating all kinds of community and activities. Voids could be interpreted as a kind of leftover space. A certain level of openness is retained since they are not involved in the urban design pattern and absence of control from the authority. The empty space is a liberated zone, which acquires the potential to enable the emergence of true publicness. Unintended activities could happen within the emptiness. For instance, back in the 1970s - 1980s, vacant lots in New York City were transformed into community gardens via the GreenThumb program with a temporary lease (History of the Community Garden Movement: NYC Parks, n.d.). These spaces are conceived as a new typology of public space through self-organized interpretation. It is crucial to identify the nature of the urban voids, respecting the existing vacancy and thereby utilizing its potential through the design process, instead of merely filling up the gap with premeditated ideas.



Fig. 8 Community Garden in NYC during 1970s-1980s



Fig. 9 Preliminary Mapping of Urban Void in Bressoux

THE POTENTIAL OF URBAN VOIDS

URBAN VOIDS IN BRESSOUX

‘Every city has them; scattered, random unused parcels of land of varying size and shape’ (Greenberg et al., 1990)

Shifting the understanding of urban voids from a theoretical level back to our city - Liege. During the site visit, it is noticeable that various forms and scales of urban voids are scattered in the neighborhood of Bressoux. A preliminary mapping of the urban void in Bressoux (fig. x) is completed in order to demonstrate the location of these spaces spread in the neighborhood. Hence, it could be briefly categorized into three groups: (1) voids between residential clusters, (2) voids between industrial clusters, and (3) immense vacant plots with sporadic infrastructure elements. Despite the fact that voids from these three groups all possess a common quality - ‘emptiness’, they also obtain individual characters that are diverse from each other. For example, some of the voids (fig. x) near the residential cluster are actually underused storage spaces or parking lots. Another type of void is completely derelict (fig. x), or even filled with an abundant amount of rubbish. The voids in Bressoux possess a multiplicity of identities, yet they also commonly obtain a quality that exclusively belongs to Liege - a sense of ruin. Such quality is disclosed from the surrounding elements and material usage of the space.

‘Urban voids are both evidence and respite’ (López-Piñeiro, 2020b).

The quality of ‘ruin’ in the voids is a shred of evidence, by composing the trace of the past as well as the everyday living in the neighborhood, revealing a post-industrial social life in the city. On

the other hand, an example of the crude football court in the voids demonstrates it as a place to respite and the publicness is gradually brewing in the neighborhood. By coalescing the ‘ruin’ and ‘emptiness’, there is a potential to provoke a truly public space and publicness exclusively belonging to the neighborhood of Bressoux.



Fig. 10 Storage Spot



Fig. 11 Industrial Garbage Space



Fig. 12 Derelict void in between residential cluster



Fig. 13 Diagrams emphasizing the elements in the voids that provoke a sense of ruin



Fig. 14 Football Court in the void

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

COMMON QUALITY:
ABSENCE OF A SENSE OF BELONGING

“internal to the city yet external to its everyday use”(Sola de Morales, 1995)

Both urban voids and Bresseoux are facing the same issue - exist in the city but do not belong to it. The voids are never integrated into the neighborhood and indeed exist as an urban segregation element. Meanwhile, the cityscape of Bressoux looks dissimilar from other parts of Liege and appears out of space with the city image. Currently, an ongoing city project - Liege 2025 has been carried out and aimed to resolve the disconnection in the city. The construction of a new tramway and exposition hall is conducted in the district of Bressoux by the municipality, envisaged as an antidote to link back to the neighborhood and city. However, a certain degree of doubtfulness toward the effectiveness of these top-down implementations is carried out. Could these metropolis developments genuinely reconnect the neighborhood and arise a sense of belonging in between?

An urban void is a representational space, which is not an abstract space conceived through planning and design (López-Piñeiro, 2020a). It is a lived space that emerges within social life, which possesses a substantial correlation with the neighborhood and could be associated as a bottom-up urban ingredient. These spaces possess the potential to conceive as an alternate public space to patch up the dispersed neighborhood.

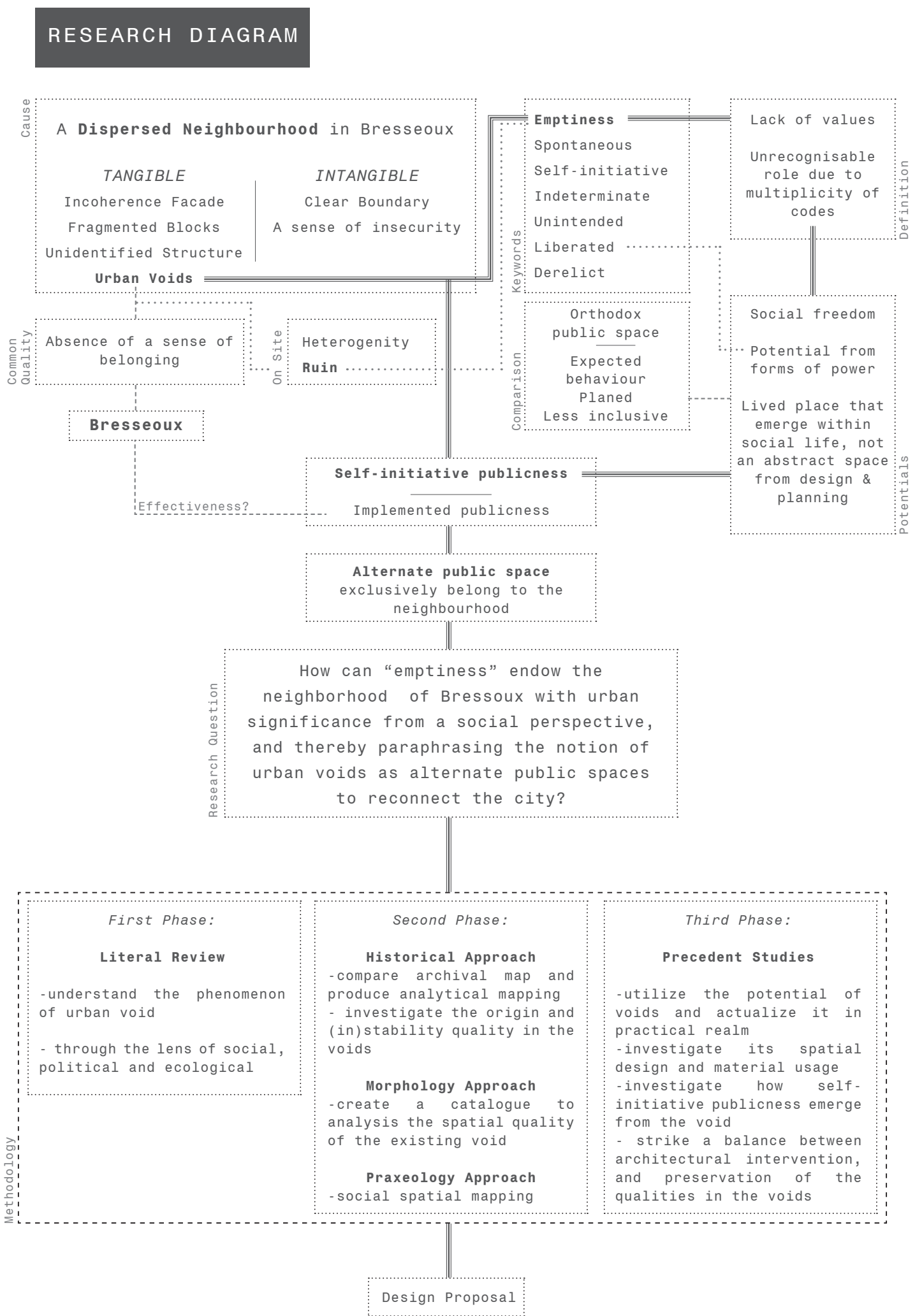
And here comes the main research question and sub-questions:

PRIMARY QUESTION:

How can “emptiness” endow the neighborhood of Bressoux with urban significance from a social perspective, and thereby paraphrasing the notion of urban voids as alternate public spaces to reconnect the city?

SUB QUESTION:

- Where are these urban voids located in Bressoux and when do these spaces emerge?
- What are the (dis)similarities of the urban voids in terms of the level of emptiness?
- What are the hidden values in the urban voids and how to translate these into a productive concept for the urban fabric, neighborhood, and everyday life?
- What are the spatial qualities of these spaces obtains differently compared to the orthodox public space?
- How could we strike a balance between actualizing the architectural intervention on the urban voids and preserving the characteristics of voids (indeterminacy and emptiness, etc.) simultaneously?
- How could architecture facilitate as a prop to provoke self-determination of publicness out of “emptiness”?



METHODOLOGY

The research will be constructed in three parts: (1) understand the phenomenon of urban voids through a theoretical framework and literature review, (2) investigate the potential of urban voids with three different research approaches (historical, morphology, and praxeology), and (3) explore the potential to translate 'void' as a productive concept into practical situations through precedence studies.

(1) FIRST PHASE: understand the phenomenon of urban voids through literature review

Various scholars had published their notion of urban voids by decoding their nature through social, political, and ecological perspectives. In order to grasp a more comprehensive understanding of my topic, I will study the literature mentioned below:

A glossary of urban voids by Sergio Lopez-Pineiro

The Limit Toward Emptiness: Urban Voids As Public Space by Sergio Lopez-Pineiro

The Urban Condition: Space, community, and self in the contemporary Metropolis by GUST

Urban Visions: From Planning Culture to Landscape Urbanism by Carmen Díez Medina and Javier Monclús

Finding Lost Space: Theories of Urban Design by Roger Trancik

(2) SECOND PHASE: investigate the hidden value and its relationship with the neighborhood of Bressoux

(a) Historical Approach
Gathering and comparing the maps from the archive, hence producing my own analytical mapping. Since the urban settlement started developing in 1942, the urban voids presumably also formed during the same period of time frame. The origin and the quality of (in)stability in the voids could be investigated through the research, hence it also responds to the first sub-question.

(b) Morphology Research
Analyzing the spatial quality from the existing urban voids through the three urban design theories (figure-ground, linkage, and place) mentioned in Finding Lost Space. Creating a typology catalog to identify (dis)similarity and spatial quality of the voids.

(c) Praxeology Research
Understanding the relationship between voids and the neighborhood through a social lens. By creating social-spatial mapping and drawings, the following three major research items could be detected:
i. identify the level of emptiness through human activities and surrounding elements
ii. reveal how the people appropriate the voids and review any potential self-initiative publicness involved
iii. comparing the research with the public space in general/ Bressoux, understand the dissimilarity qualities which enable to foster as an alternate public space

3) THIRD PHASE: explore the potential to translate 'void' as a productive concept through precedent research

Analyzing the precedent studies will give an insight into how to utilize the potential of voids, and realize it as a

productive concept in a practical realm. The following references demonstrate how to conduct an architectural intervention while preserving the qualities in the voids concurrently.

- Parc de la Villette (Bernard Tschumi)
- Schouwburplein (WEST 8)
- Binnenrotte (WEST 8)
- Interstitial Hong Kong (book reference)
- Aldo van Eyck's Playgrounds, Amsterdam
- Standaertsite Park (murmur architecten, Carton123 architecten, AE-architecten)

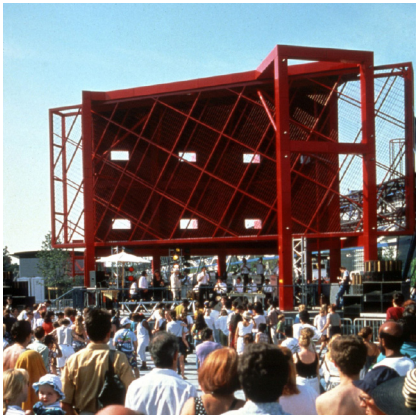


Fig. 15 Parc de la Villette



Fig. 16 Schouwburplein



Fig. 17 Aldo van Eyck's Playground



Fig. 18 Standaertsite Park

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IMAGE

Figure 1: Author. (2022)

Figure 2: Ibid.

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Figure 8: Wikipedia Contributors. (2020, January 14). Community gardens in New York City. Wikipedia; Wikimedia Foundation. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_Gardens_in_New_York_City

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Figure 16: Harbor cranes at Schouwburgplein . Rotterdam. Make it Happen. (n.d.). Rotterdam. Make It Happen. Retrieved November 11, 2022, from https://rotterdammakeithappen.nl/en/media-objects/2013_schouwburgplein_cd/

Figure 17: Das Kind, die Stadt und die Kunst | AEX. (2013). *Architecture-Exhibitions.com*. <https://www.architecture-exhibitions.com/en/kunstsammlung-nordrhein-westfalen-%E2%80%93-schmela-haus/das-kind-die-stadt-und-die-kunst>

Figure 18: Gallery of Standaertsite Park / murmur architecten + Carton123 architecten + AE-architecten - 10. (n.d.). *ArchDaily*. Retrieved November 10, 2022, from https://www.archdaily.com/942738/standaertsite-park-murmur-architecten-plus-carton123-architecten-plus-ae-architecten/5efba39db3576595b80001c4-standaertsite-park-murmur-architecten-plus-carton123-architecten-plus-ae-architecten-photo?next_project=no