

Reflection

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What did I learn from the project?

Good architecture doesn't exist. Bad architecture doesn't exist either. Architecture always lies somewhere on the scale from either totally fitting, to not suitable for the user at all. In my project I discovered that not everybody likes the current mall of Hof van Spaland. Some say it's grey and dull, while other praise it for its liveliness and good stores. Both viewpoints are right, because it is drawn from their own perception, but that does not make this mall bad or good architecture. The current form of the mall appears to be fitting for some, and not that much for others. This raises the question: how do I update a building to the wishes of a neighbourhood, as these wishes can lie so far apart? How do I make something that fits?

As malls in the Netherlands appear to be economically stable, many of them get maintained in their current form, although these centres lack in qualitative public space. Municipalities do often realize that these centres deserve extra attention or a proper renewal, but it often results in the addition of housing that often only generate money for an update of the public space but never fully contributing in it. That there is a problem with the Modernist mall, is not questioned in society, but the ways how this problem is treated does not help in finding a permanent solution. Often is focussed on commercial value, and this only strengthens consumer mentality. It's exactly that view that caused the architecturally related problems that were found, and moreover, it does not address to the needs of qualitative public space. Malls like Hof van Spaland are the intersections in neighbourhoods and with some interventions, they can be ideal crystallization points for community building.

Research approach

This project was done within the ExploreLab graduation studio. This studio has no overarching theme, neither a set of guidelines. Students within Explorelab are completely free in their choices. However, I figured that the project approach is similar to a lot of other ExploreLab projects, as they often create a new framework for a hypothetical alternative society. In this research I decided to focus on general suburban mall architecture and public space. Not only deserves this type of architecture more attention, the malls also cannot keep up with the demands for qualitative and liveable neighbourhoods. When doing my first research into mall architecture, I assumed these concepts were problematic because of their economic decline. As this appeared not to be the case, I tried to put in words the problematic feeling I had about these Modernistic buildings. I discovered that the problem merely lied in the public space, or the lack of it. Therefore, research starts with the description of qualitative public space and how this contributes to social cohesion and community building. With this it points out the importance of qualitative public space. Furthermore, describing how this could be achieved helps understanding the problems with the public space of Hof van Spaland. It justifies the focus on public space and community building by putting it in a broader perspective of the gains this creates for the society. In the first part I already discovered how much research still needs to be done on public space in the Netherlands, but also how little I knew of making good public space. The general view I had of what determined good public space is needed to disappear, because it was too generic, and merely based on looks instead of real value. After this was out of the way, I could make up my mind and listen carefully to the wishes of the people without judgement.

The research focusses on the Dutch suburban mall, more specifically, the mall of Schiedam Spaland. The research looked deeper into the public space

in and around this mall and observed how people were using this space. The research is consisting out of two parts that are intertwined in several chapters. First, the mall and possible problems were studied in literature. After the discovery of the several problems, the effect was studied on the people visiting or living close by Hof van Spaland in the second part. The three problems were: Monofunctional programming, car-mobility and inside orientation. With fieldwork consisting of interviews, flowing dialogue and observations was discovered how the mall concept could be transformed. This second part was especially relevant, because this was connecting the scientific knowledge to the real situation. During my first studies, I already discovered that this link was often lacking, and of big importance when making a redesign that wants to create value for the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. During the fieldwork I discovered that it can be hard to discover the real opinions of people, and it can also be hard to filter out irrelevant information. In times of a pandemic, some people are just eager to have a conversation, instead of focussing on giving valuable information. In the interviews and dialogues, I needed to be careful with confidential information because I already planned that the research was being publicly distributed

When translating the lessons from the research into a masterplan, many aspects could be worked out in further detail. Because I discovered many problems, and the masterplan was focussing on the whole direct surrounding of the mall of Hof van Spaland, I firstly decided that I would work out five potential sites in detail. I figured that this meant that the project was going to be less detailed, like an urban plan or a set of general recommendations. I decided that I also wanted to show a smaller scale in the project, so I decided to pick one of the five sites. This site needed to face many of the problems I discovered. In the smaller scale I could explain many characteristics of the other sites as well. On this site I could show how the building of the mall and the public space surrounding the mall could work together to generate value for the people of the neighbourhood of Spaland. By working in detail, I could probably make a more realistic plan that was looking less hypothetical.

Goal of the project

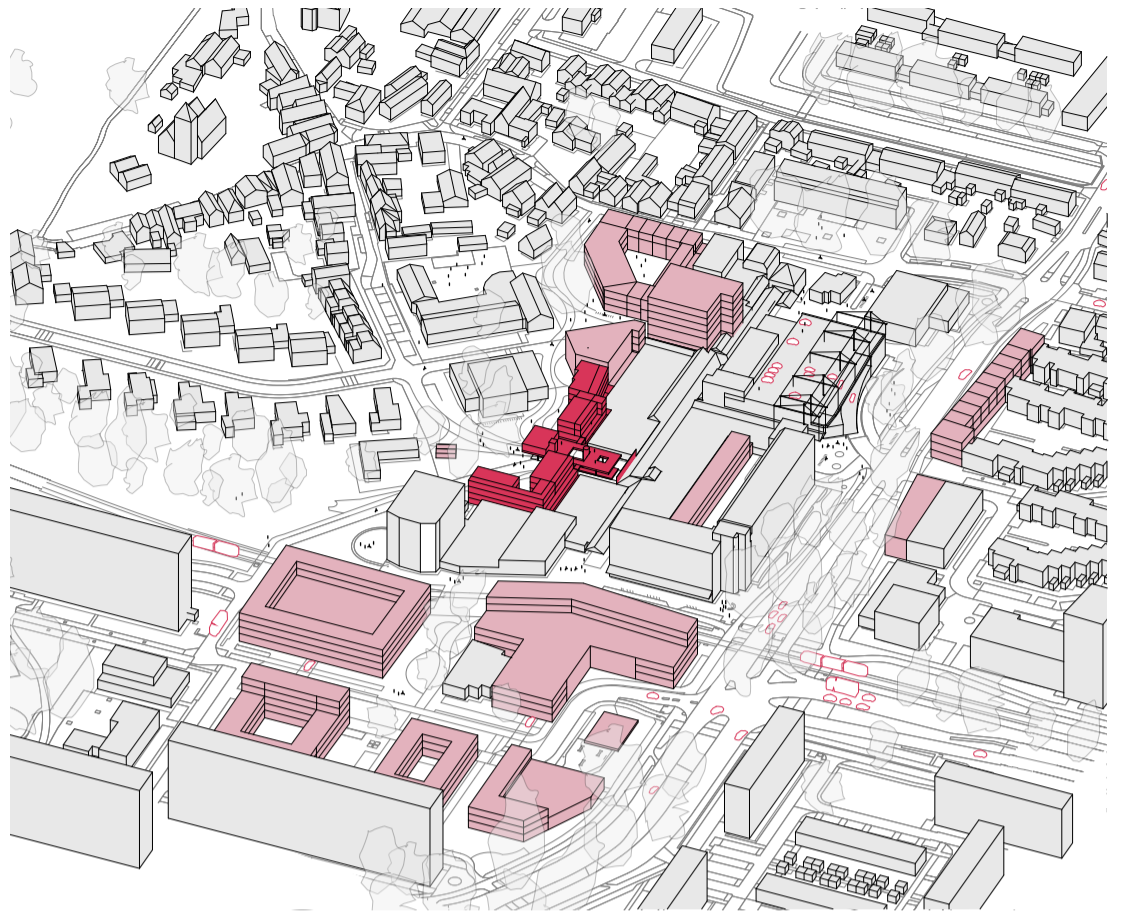
The main goal of the project was to make a project that is serving and strengthening the community. Hof van Spaland is a mall that could benefit from a renovation in the coming years, but I feared that it would undergo a typical mall renovation that would maintain its current functioning. In my opinion, this would be a shame and a waste of money. Although the project is (as almost all graduation projects) hypothetical, it has the desire to inspire the municipality, social facilities, and shop owners to work together in establishing an alternative renewal of Hof van Spaland. By showing this alternative

framework, existing first-phase plans for the building can be corrected or changed completely according to new findings. The project introduces another set of values than commercial ones, that the people living in the neighbourhood will profit from. The project also points out the need for intervening in the building and surrounding. The municipality points out the private ownership of the building, but the demand for change is high, as Schiedam Hof van Spaland is one of the only centres in the Rotterdam-The Hague that has never been renovated or renewed. To activate the people, the project needed to be understandable for a wide public, but also being branded and distributed. For extra strength, I had to keep in mind that sometimes the project needed to be more utopic and less realistic. Images can change people's mind, so together with my tutors I decided that in my project, I could use more expensive and qualitative materials or greenery, if it made the project look more attractive. Moreover, I could decide to only show what would be most relevant, and don't work out everything in detail. I decided to mainly show the parts that were most relevant to community building, because that was where I was aiming for. This is also the reason that I changed the title of the project. First it was called 'borders and backsides'. Although this is still a sum up of the current problematic situation, I decided that the title needed to be more inspiring and activist. Therefore, I changed it to 'We need to talk about the mall', a title meant to spark curiosity and change.

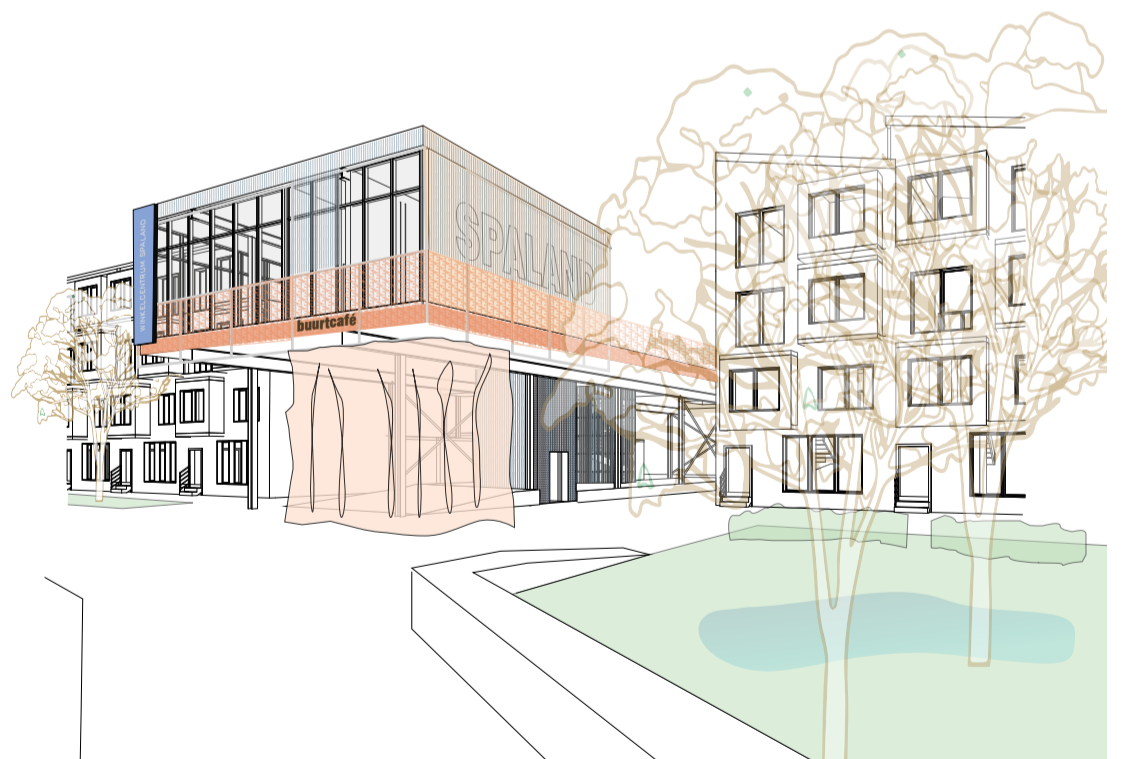
My graduation project fits in the current desire for adaptation and reuse. It generates a new framework for mall renovations that is based on more resilient values instead of the polluting consumeristic approach. It also partly used the existing building of Hof van Spaland, which required extensive analysis of the site to build on top of existing values. Although the research itself is done on the mall of Schiedam Spaland and can only be used to generate a redesign for the public space of this mall, the method on how this redesign and research is executed can be used for other malls to reactive the public space when they are based on similar modernist city planning. This questions and touches upon a broader economic system of renovations and demolitions happening in Modernist neighbourhoods. As there are many of these malls and neighbourhoods across the Netherlands and even Europe, the project generates an interesting case study that can be used example to understand how social issues and modernist architecture are related, and how they could be solved.

Conclusion – what did I learn?

In the project I learned how communities are of great importance, and that the design of the public space can play a big role in it. The project searches for an answer on the question how to make good public space that suits the neighbourhood. In the project I learned that making something that fits everyone is nearly impossible. Even my tutors did not always agree with me, or each other, on several design choices. However, I learned that there are several objective measures that make it more likely that the public space is well used by different groups. To discover how to use the design in its full potential, it was necessary to go into the field and discover what people were using the space and what their opinions were. During this process I needed to filter a lot of information to get the full potential out of it, but in the end, it gave me many interesting insights and a steady foundation for my masterplan and intervention. Although the market hall and canteen designs are hypothetical, it could spark thoughts on the real situation. Hopefully this leads to a plan where the municipality is going to put effort in adding real communal value to Hof van Spaland.



▲ Big scale of the masterplan. On this scale I could not explain the details that I wanted to show.



▲ Market hall and neighbourhood canteen. A smaller scale where I can show materials and quality.