

# Urban sanctuaries

Daan Somsen

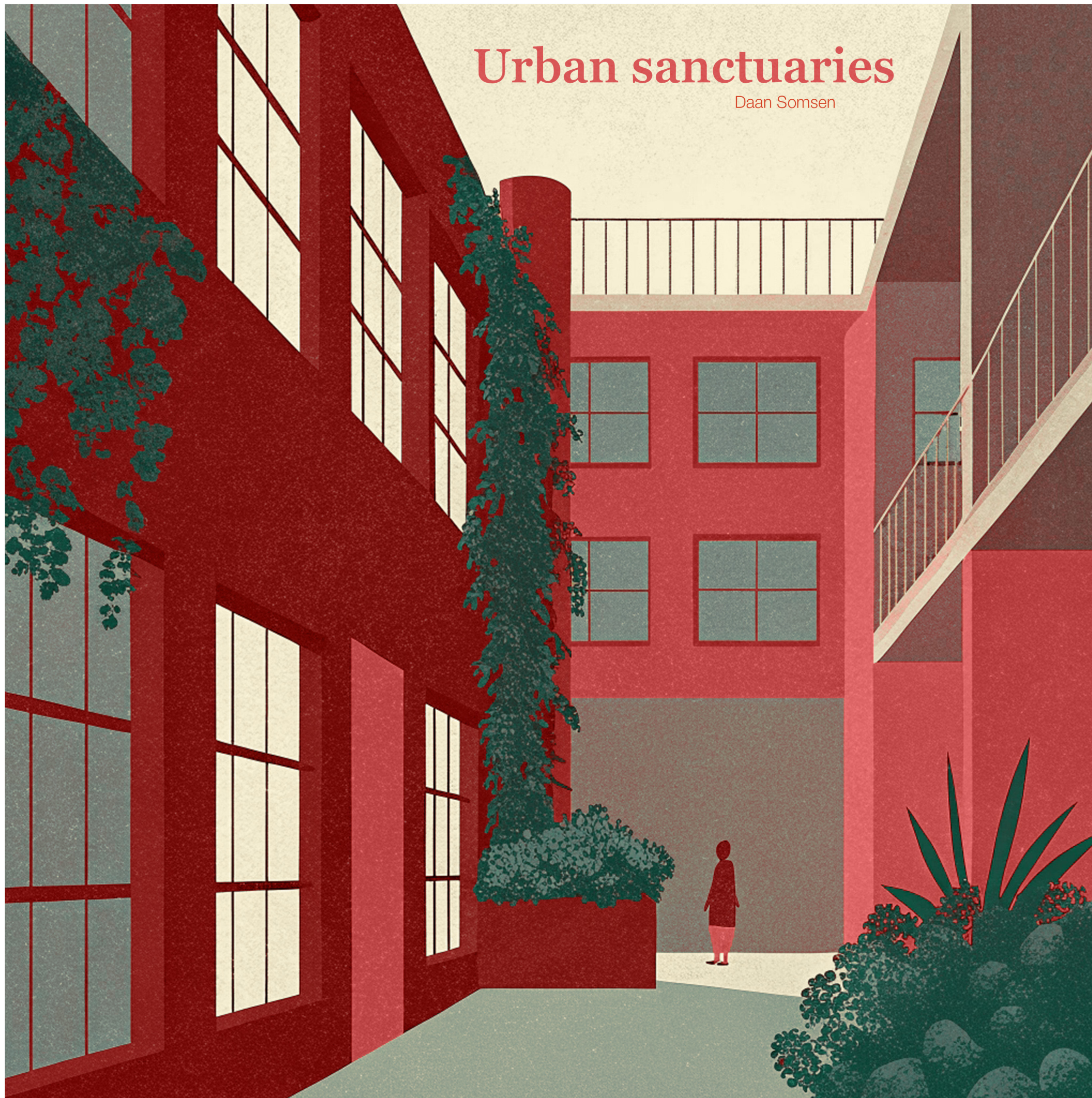




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# Introduction

My research interest stems from a personal fascination with finding calm in a fast-paced society. Throughout my life, I have often struggled to feel truly relaxed in urban environments, particularly during my time living in Rotterdam. At times, I found it freeing to escape to the rural area where I grew up. However, I believe that by becoming more familiar with city spaces and discovering pockets of relaxation, it is possible to reduce this tension, making city life more manageable and enjoyable.

Despite these challenges, I find urban life exciting and dynamic. There is always something happening. Yet, I am driven by the question of whether the seeming contradiction between the vibrancy of cities and the need for tranquility can be reconciled.

This interest is not purely personal. Rising stress levels are a societal concern (Lederbogen et al., 2011), and I believe that while architecture alone cannot fully solve this issue, it can play a vital role. Cities are also becoming increasingly anonymous, as traditional communal spaces fade or transform. For example, the diminishing role of churches, once central as spiritual and social gathering points, reflects broader social shifts (Gehl, 2010).

The growing sense of individualism presents not only social challenges but also spatial ones. If we can find better ways to share spaces and functions while maintaining a feeling of ownership, we can each enjoy more usable square meters in our daily lives, without needing to increase the total built space (Hertzberger, 1991).

Today's cities are busier than ever. As urban populations grow, life becomes increasingly fast-paced, dense, and disconnected. This intensification leads to higher levels of urban stress, manifesting in anxiety and social isolation (Evans, 2003). Amid this intensity, people still long for places of solitude, reflection, and connection places where they can pause, recharge, and feel a sense of belonging. These urban sanctuaries, often modest and tucked within the city fabric, offer tranquility and connection despite the lively urban context.

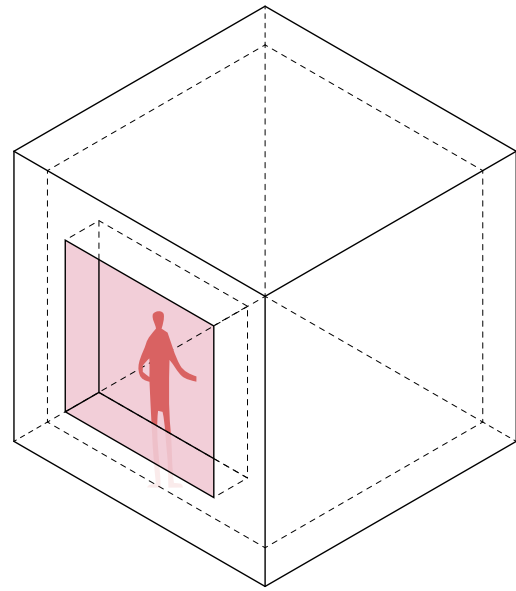
Through my research, I seek to highlight the importance of these urban sanctuaries, demonstrating their value and exploring how their qualities can be incorporated into architectural design.

To achieve this, I explored a variety of case studies, focusing on how these sanctuaries are created, experienced, and appropriated by their communities. My research journey began with personal observations, where I examined the spaces in and around my own home, identifying informal routines and moments of calm in daily life. During a study trip to Marseille, I delved deeper into this theme. The warm climate and vibrant outdoor culture made it easier to observe how people naturally carve out spaces for relaxation and social connection.

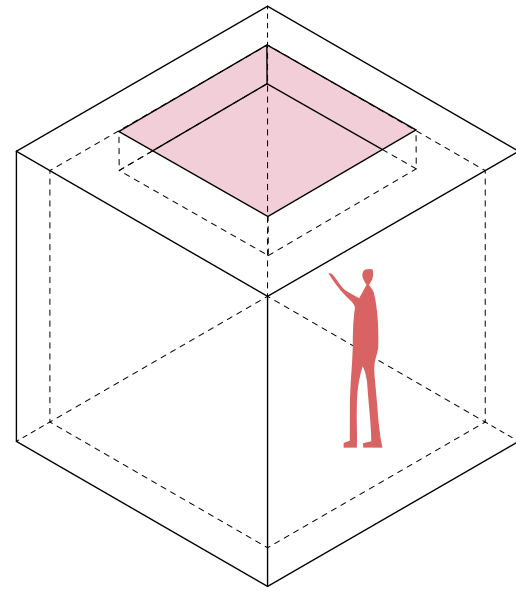
Returning to Hoboken, I continued this exploration around the Blikfabriek site. The Blikfabriek itself functioned almost as an urban sanctuary, offering a gathering space for a specific target audience. However, outside of this curated environment, there was a noticeable lack of accessible, informal spaces for relaxation and connection within the broader neighborhood.

To structure my analysis, I developed a series of key themes that emerged from my observations and case studies. These themes guide my ongoing research into how cities can better integrate sanctuaries. Spaces of calm, ownership, and community, into their increasingly dense and dynamic landscapes.

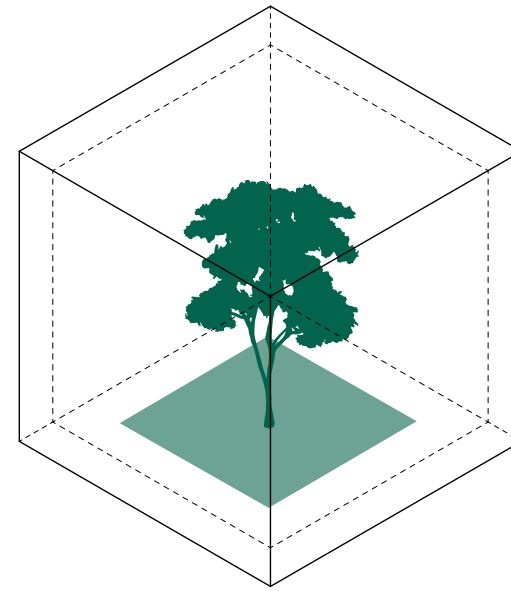
# Themes



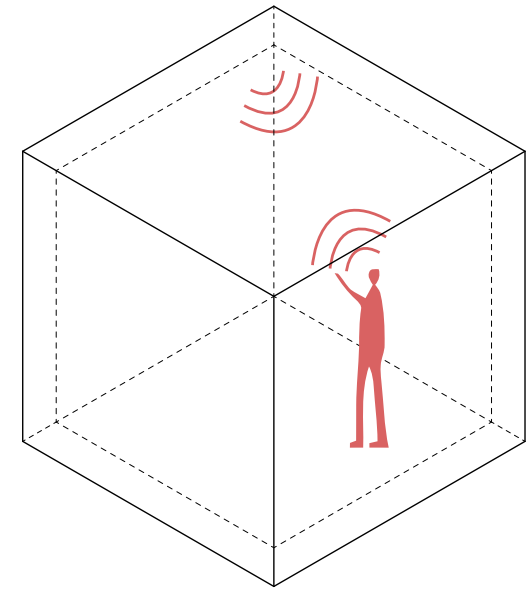
Framed view



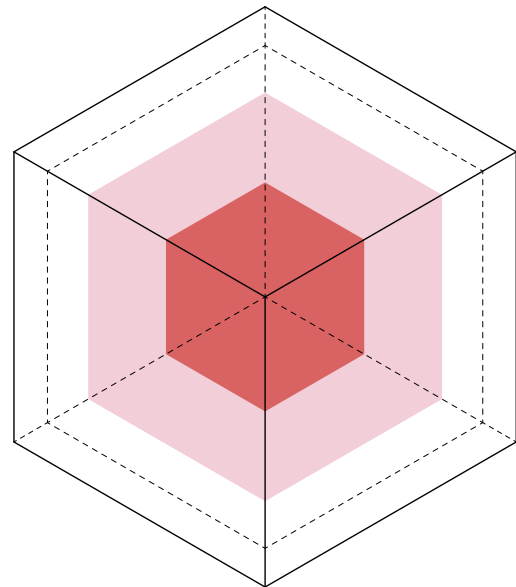
Open to sky



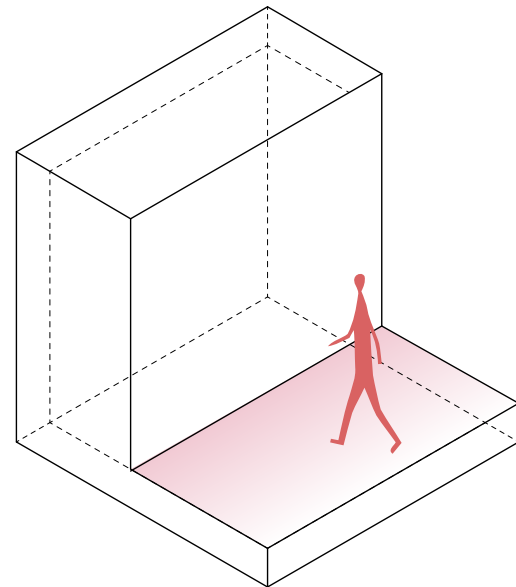
Biophilic design



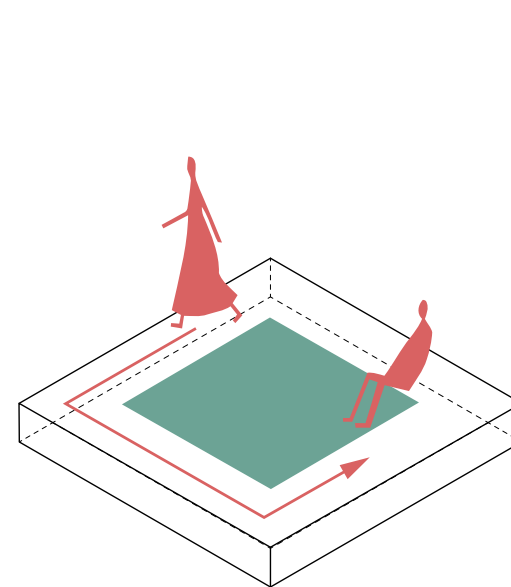
soundscape



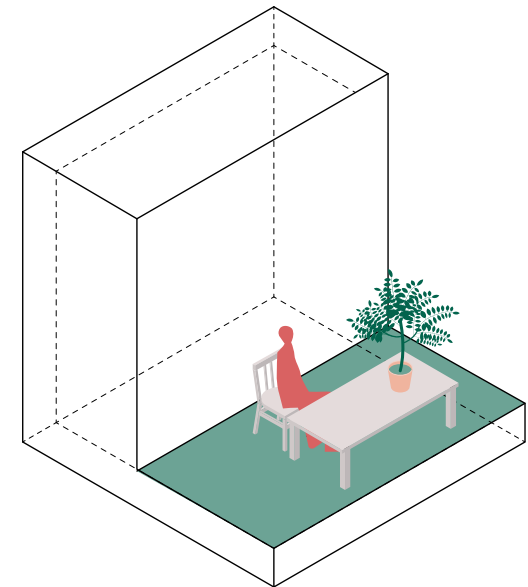
Scale



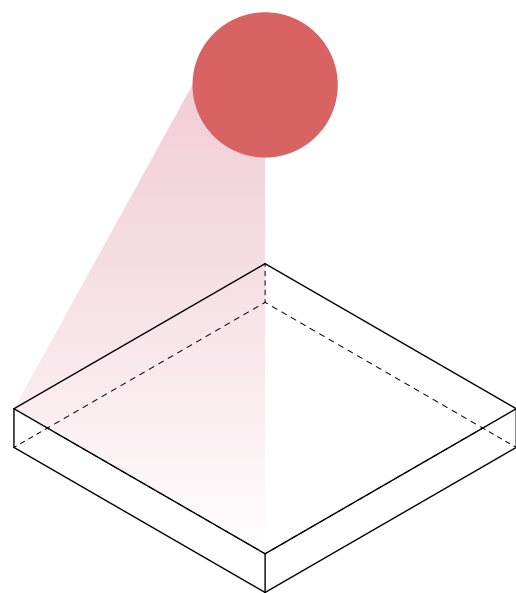
Threshold



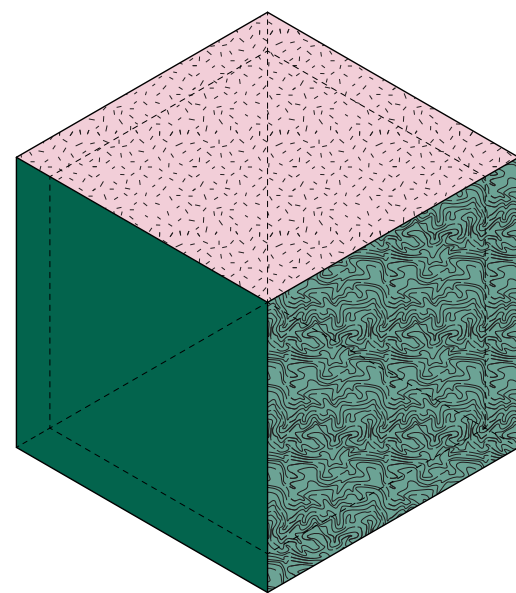
Periphery



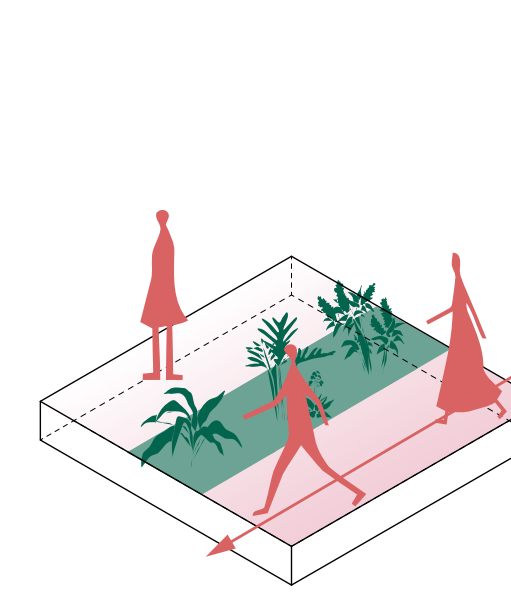
Appropriation



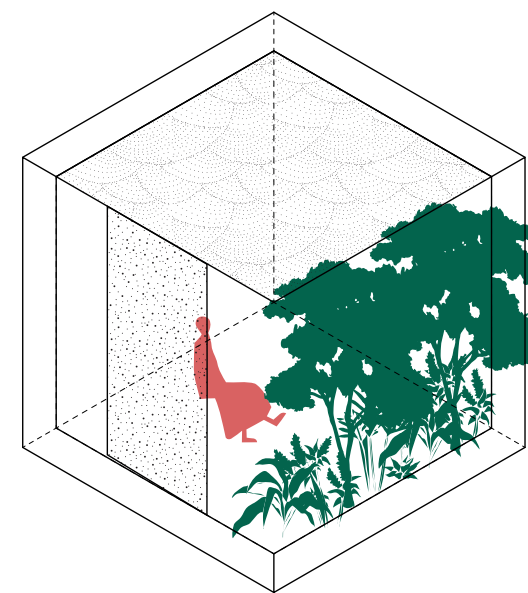
Role of light or the absence of light



Color, texture and materials

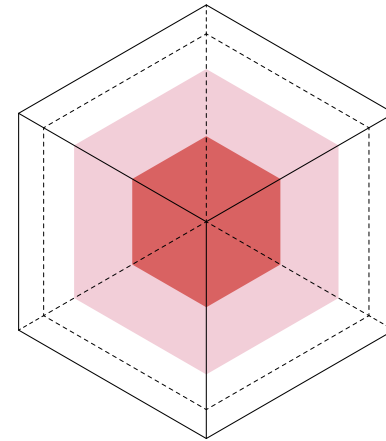


Flow - buffer - tranquil zones



Types of enclosure





## Scale

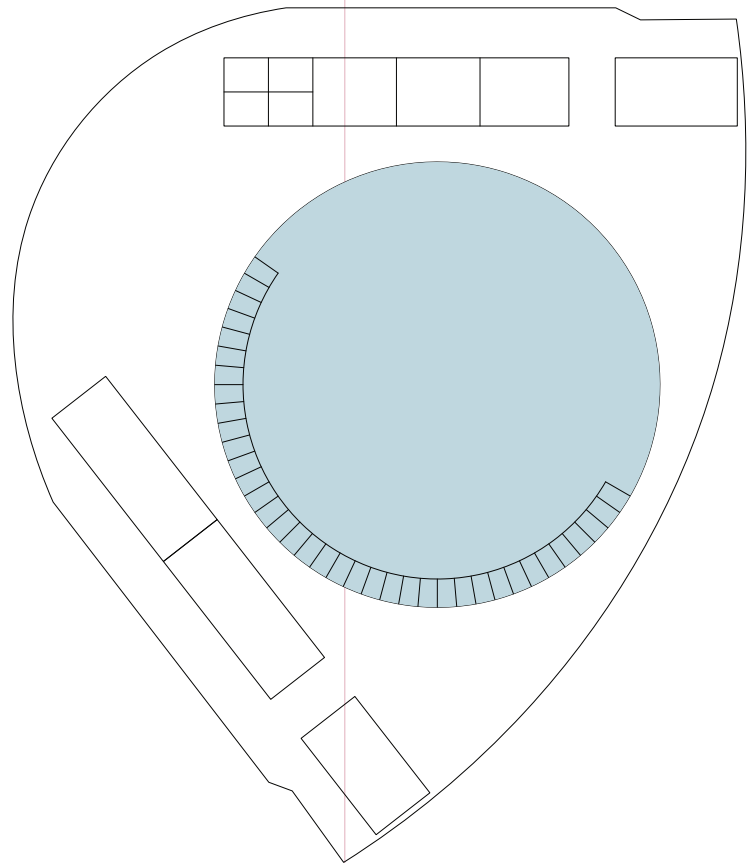
Scale defines how spaces relate to the human body, the surrounding context, and the sensory experience of those who inhabit or pass through them. It influences whether a space feels intimidating or welcoming, overwhelming or intimate, anonymous or personal.

Sanctuaries that are successful at creating tranquility often achieve this by incorporating elements that respond directly to human proportions and sensory experiences. Seating heights that are comfortable and inviting make longer stays and moments of contemplation possible. Just like pathways that guide but do not rush movement, using proportions that naturally slow the pace.

A well-designed sanctuary considers how the body moves, rests, and perceives space addressing not just visual needs. Through my analysis, I have observed how subtle changes in scale significantly impact how spaces are perceived. There is also a link to the size of the space and the amount of people using it as a sanctuary. Although the spaces have not one perfect size there is a correlation between how big the space is and the amount of people. In general for sanctuaries for more people there is more square meter per person available. And the bigger places are mostly around 16m<sup>2</sup> per person. While the ones for 1 person are around 6m<sup>2</sup> per person.

There are other things I've picked up on in my analysis. Verticality for example, Lower ceilings foster intimacy, while double-height spaces can evoke awe and wonder. There is also a balance between compression and expansion. Designing moments where narrow, enclosed spaces open up into light-filled, expansive areas creates a rhythm that keeps the experience dynamic and restorative. Large industrial structures can be softened and made accessible by introducing scaled interventions, such as seating pods, smaller pathways, or tactile features at human height. Like the stone statue in the wintergarden of the Blikfabriek. And lastly allowing for both communal zones and private niches ensures that the sanctuary can accommodate diverse user needs.

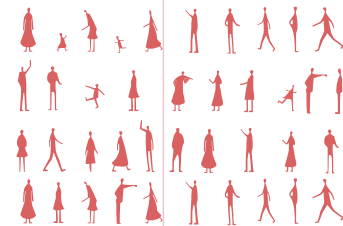
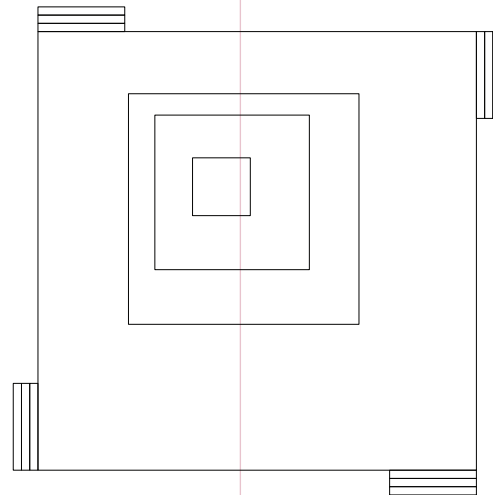
Harbor bath Aarhus



**567 m2**

30 people

18,9 m2/pp

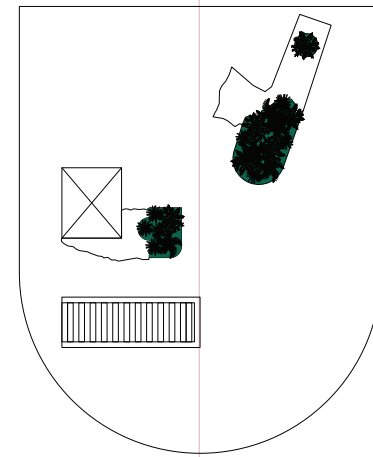


**592 m2**

40 people

14,8 m2/pp

Roofgarden architecture school Marseille

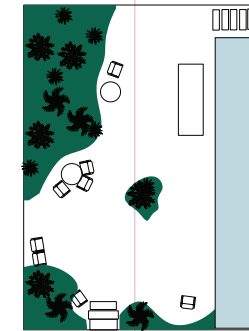


**173 m2**

10 people

17,3 m2/pp

Winter garden Blikfabriek Antwerp



**97 m2**

8 people

12,1 m2/pp

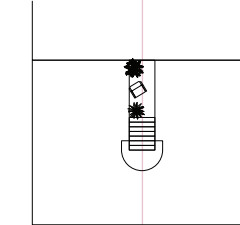
Collonade Marseille



**10 m2**

1 people

10 m2/pp



**2 m2\***

1 people

2 m2/pp

Excluding the  
larger surrounding  
area

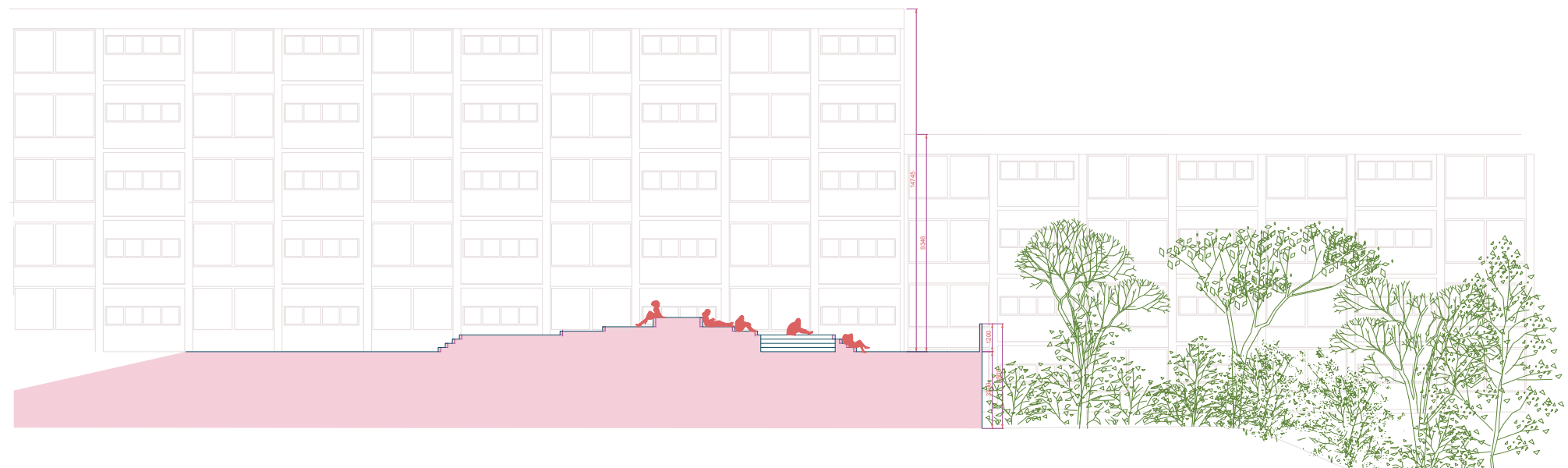
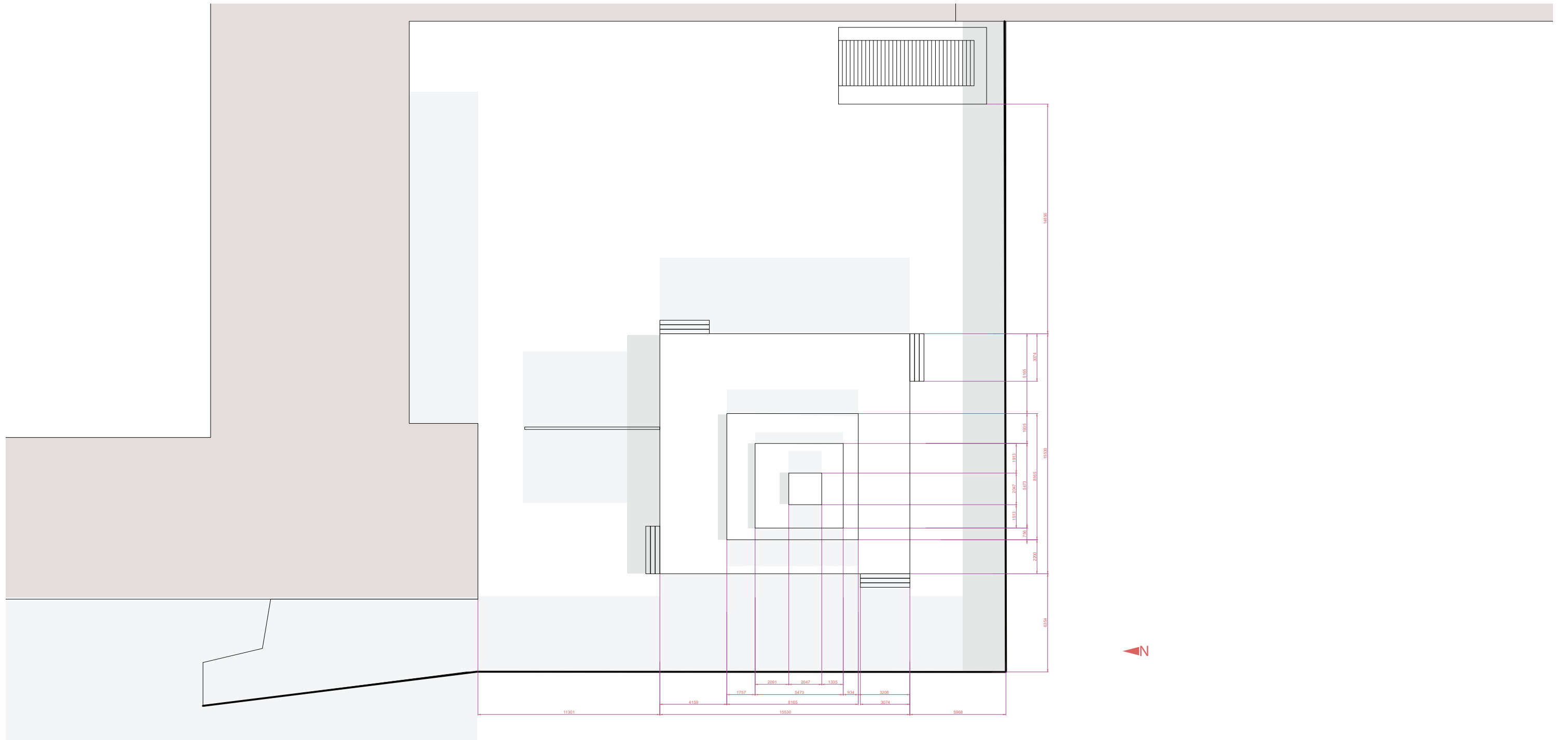


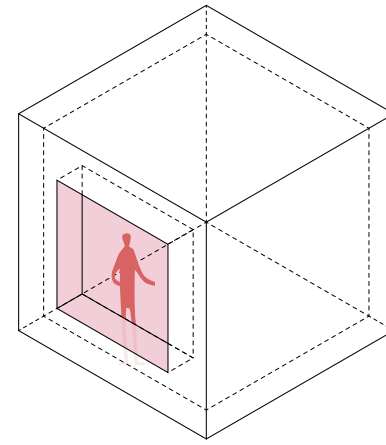
**7 m2**

1 people

7 m2/pp







## Framed view

framed views help in shaping how people perceive, experience, and engage with their surroundings. By carefully directing the gaze, framed views can transform even the most chaotic urban environments into moments of clarity, beauty, and tranquility.

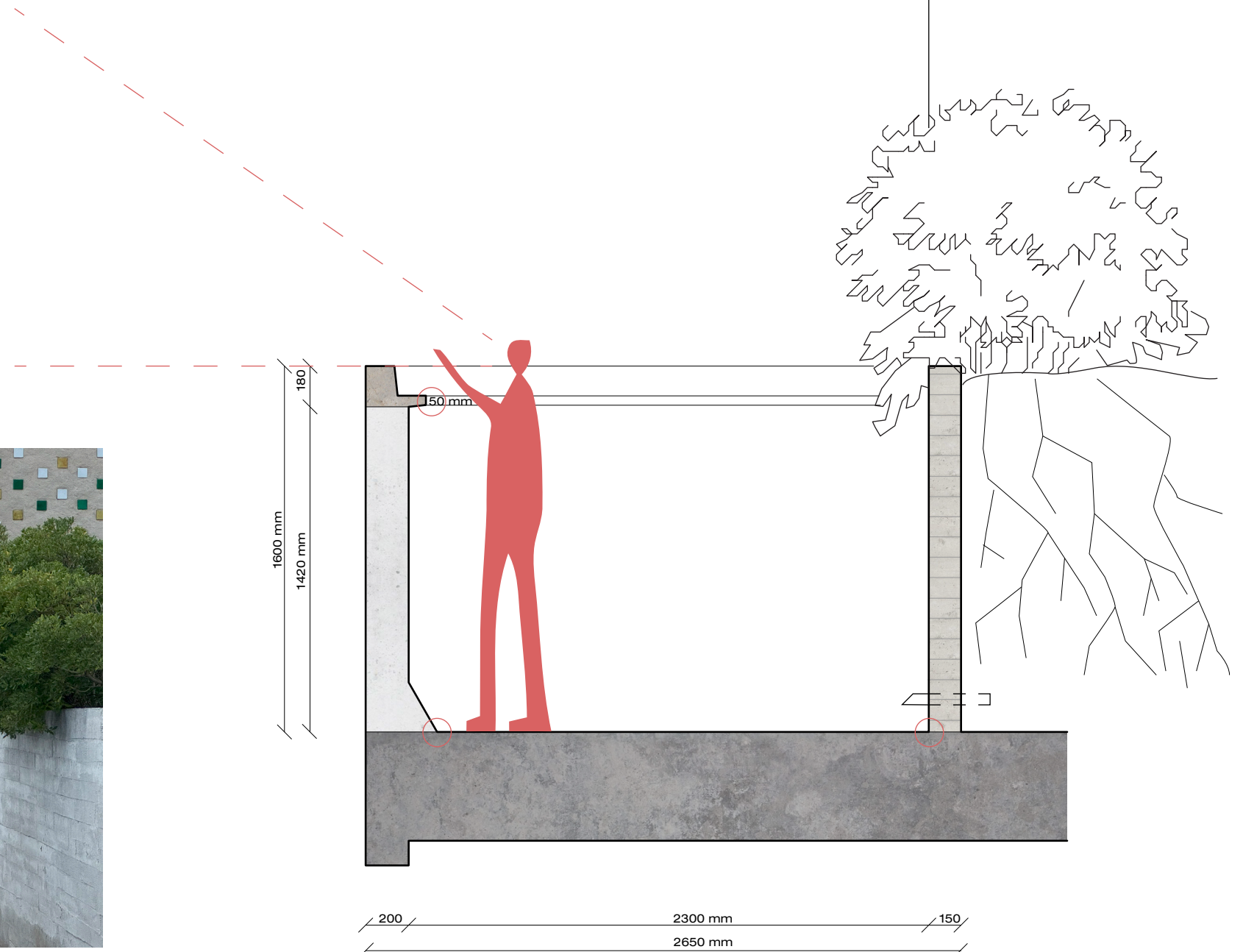
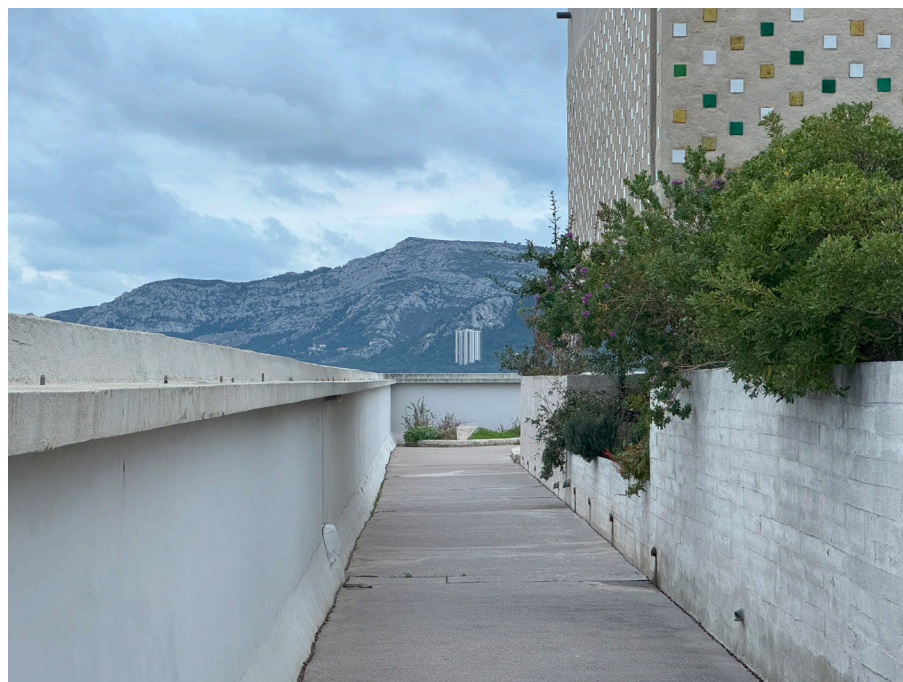
Framed views do more than merely highlight a particular scene; they help define a sanctuary by creating visual focus points that give purpose and structure to the space. Whether looking out onto a serene garden or capturing a dynamic street scene from a protected vantage point, these intentional frames provide a sense of visual order amid urban complexity.

An absence of certain senses can also heighten other senses, so you can direct a certain experience.



## Unite d'habitation

The roof of unite d'habitation is designed in a way that you don't see the busy city but only the natural elements that surround the city. This is done through orientation and a wall on the sides that block the view down to the building blocks. This is a very top down modernist approach to this method, and doesn't fully function. Because the first thing people do is look over the wall. But when you are in the middle of the roof this does give a calm feeling, with softened sounds of the city on the background.



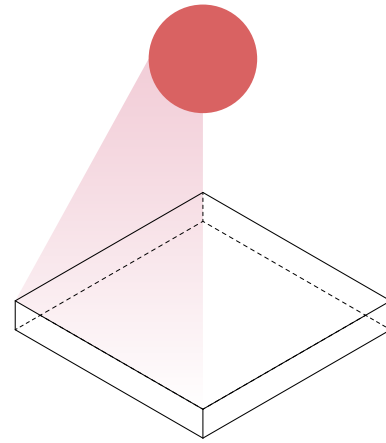


## Hobokense polder

In the Hobokense polder, there are a couple of art / bird watching installations. These series of framed views combined with information about the wildlife give you a different experience than if it wasn't framed. At the same time they protect you against the part you are watching, in this case handy so the birds don't spot you. By taking away part of the experience you engage people more in a certain part of it.







## Light or absence of light

Light in architecture has a strong relationship with the atmosphere and emotional experience within it. In the context of urban sanctuaries, light plays a crucial role in defining moments of tranquility, reflection, and connection. Equally important is the intentional absence of light, which can create cocooning, intimate environments that foster introspection and calm.

Natural and artificial lighting can evoke a sense of rhythm, guiding users through a space or signaling different zones within a sanctuary. Shifting levels of illumination can gently transition between active and passive areas, offering clarity in one zone and retreat in another.

Soft, diffused light can evoke a serene and welcoming atmosphere, while dappled or shifting light patterns create visual interest and movement. Changes in daylight throughout the day can help connect people to natural rhythms. This also ties in to the temporal nature of urban sanctuaries. Because the usage of these spaces is sometimes dependent on a ray of sunshine hitting a certain spot. Like at the places in Marseille we stopped. Where it was often not in a sun overflown place, but a spot where the sun peeked underneath a canopy.

Darker, shadowed areas provide a sense of containment and refuge, essential for moments of personal retreat. And light can guide focus toward specific features, much like a spotlight draws attention in a theater.

## Winter garden Blikfabriek

In the winter garden the light plays an important role in defining the space. It gets broken up by the polycarbonate panels into soft light. Then it falls in a certain direction into the room, highlighting a certain side depending on the time of day. On the object the light reflects differently creating patterns and movement in the water, highlighting the shiny chairs and disappearing in the plants. This creates a play with roles for different elements in the room.

### Light analyses



Soft light enters through roof lights

Water reflects light and creates visual calming movement

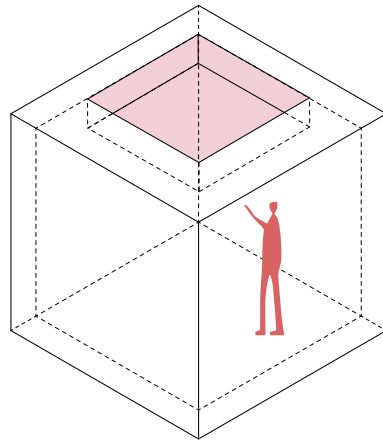
Central elements get lit softly like this table top



Light falls away in plants and create a contrast with the other elements in the room







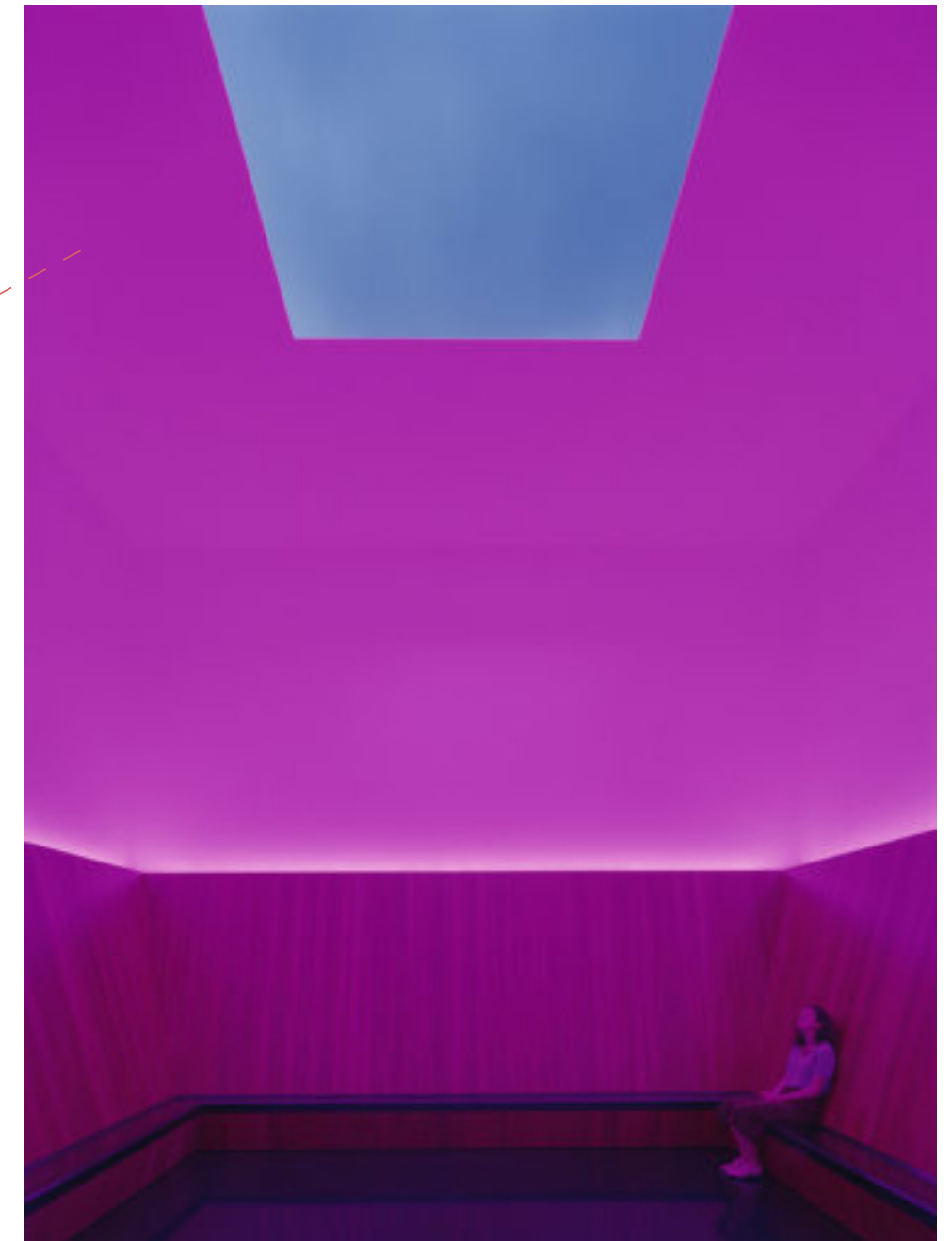
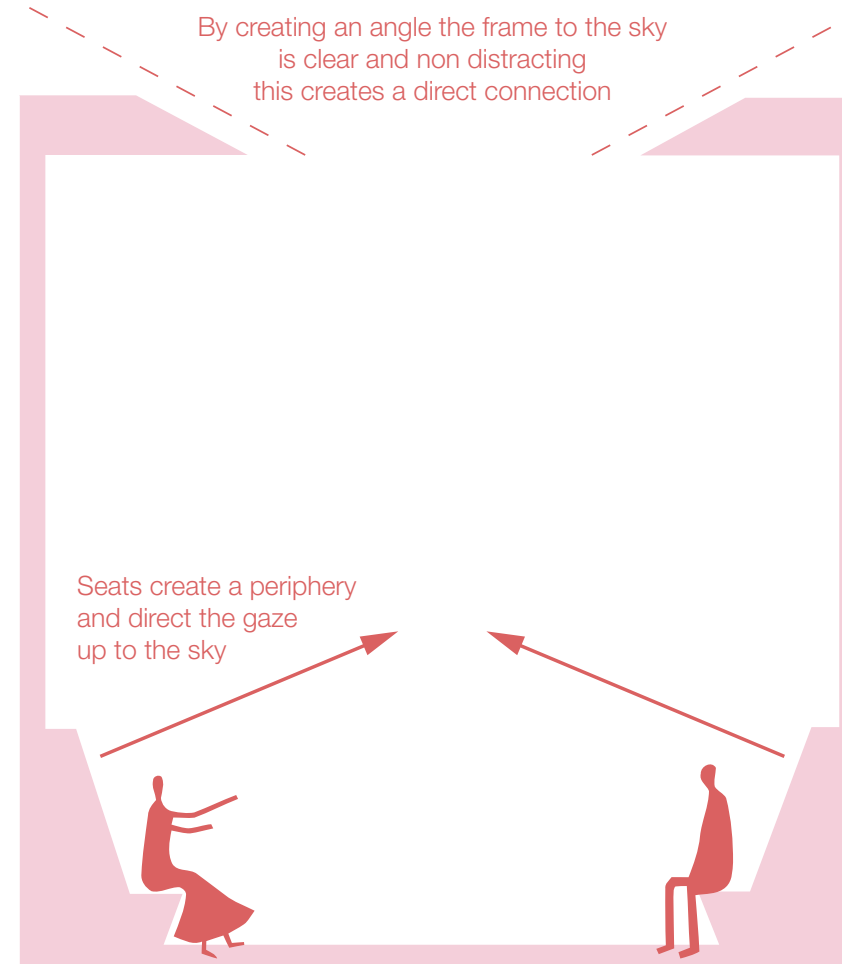
## Open to the sky

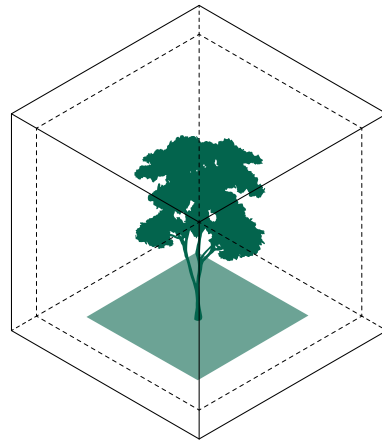
Spaces that embrace openness to the sky provide physical and psychological relief from urban congestion, fostering a sense of freedom, tranquility, and connection to nature's rhythms.

The ability to see and feel the sky introduces a temporal dimension to spaces—daylight shifts, passing clouds, and starry nights all become part of the sensory experience. Such openness encourages deep breaths and moments of contemplation, offering users a break from the structural rigidity and visual constraints typical of urban life.

## James Turrell Museum Voorlinden

James Turrell's Skyspace at Museum Voorlinden exemplifies the transformative power of framing the sky. The installation consists of a serene, enclosed room with a precisely angled roof opening that creates a dynamic, living artwork. That shifts with the weather, light, and time of day. Illustrating how a thoughtful architectural intervention can transform the intangible expanse above into a sanctuary for reflection.





## Biophilic design

Biophilic design is rooted in the idea that humans have an innate need to connect with nature. In dense urban environments where contact with the natural world is often limited, integrating elements of nature into architectural spaces becomes important for well-being and mental restoration. Urban sanctuaries benefit from biophilic design strategies, which help create tranquil, sensory-rich spaces that counterbalance the stress of city life.

Exposure to natural elements, plants, water, and natural materials has been shown to reduce stress, improve mood, and enhance cognitive function. The organic textures, scents, and colors of nature offer sensory diversity that sharpens awareness. Unlike static urban structures, natural elements introduce variation over time, such as changing seasons, weather patterns, and plant growth, adding a sense of vitality and renewal to sanctuary spaces.



Placement of biophilic design

All spots I have chosen to research have a form of biophilic design. Either in the form of water or plants. The placement of these natural elements is also important. It can be part of a backdrop, often drawing the gaze away from the sanctuary. An example is the square in Marseille or my balcony. Another way is placing the natural elements central like the roof garden of the school, the garden in Zumthors design or the harbor bath. This makes it the main focus and turns you inward to the space. A third way is placing natural elements in the periphery like the winter garden. This creates a soft boundary and often creates nooks.

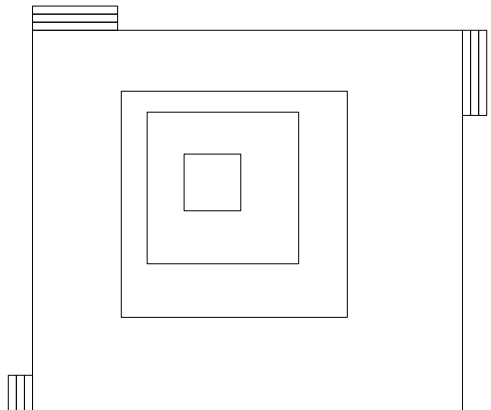
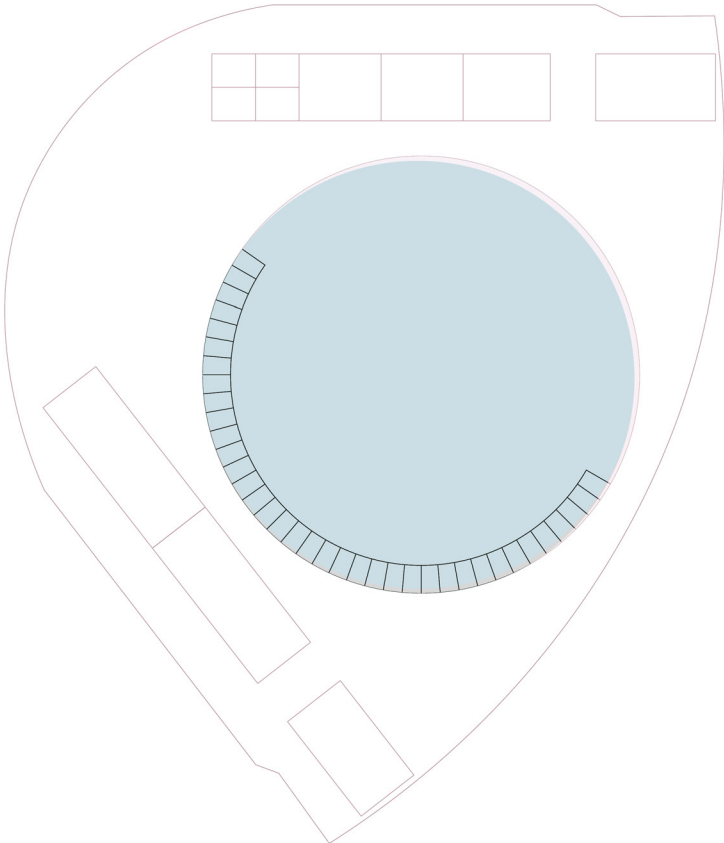
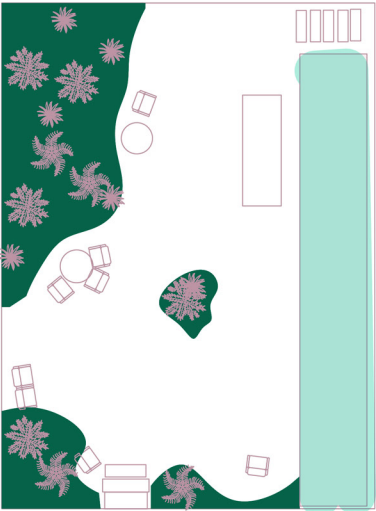
Backdrop

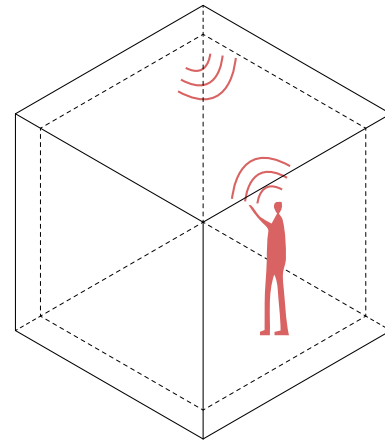


Central element



Soft boundary





## Soundscape

Sound is a powerful yet often overlooked element in shaping our experiences of space. In cities, where noise pollution is a constant backdrop, creating sanctuaries of intentional soundscapes becomes essential.

A well-composed soundscape might involve the soft rustle of leaves, the trickling of water, or carefully moderated ambient sounds that mask the chaos of urban life. Silence, too, plays a vital role providing spaces where the absence of intrusive noise allows users to reconnect with their own thoughts.

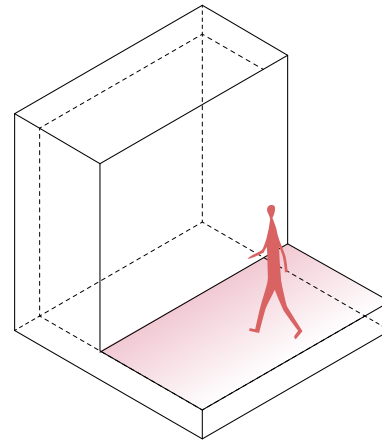


## Storm room and winter garden

A compelling example is the “Storm Room” at ARoS Museum in Denmark. This immersive installation recreates the sensory experience of being inside a Japanese apartment during a storm. The carefully designed auditory elements the pattering of rain, the distant roll of thunder, and the occasional rush of wind blend with subtle lighting effects to envelop visitors in a calm yet dynamic atmosphere. This soundscape transforms a simple room into a meditative sanctuary, where the controlled presence of natural sounds provides both stimulation and tranquility. But also the winter garden in the blikfabriek has water fountains that create a symphony with outdoor noises, because the building is, perhaps unintentionally open to the outdoors in some places.







## Threshold

A threshold is not merely a point of entry but a transformative space that marks the transition from one condition to another—from public to private, bustling to serene, chaotic to composed. Thoughtfully designed thresholds create a moment of pause, preparing users mentally and physically as they enter spaces of reflection, connection, and calm.

Thresholds provide a defined yet inviting entrance, signaling the presence of a sanctuary and making it legible within the urban fabric. A well-designed threshold offers a gradual transition rather than a sudden shift, easing users from public to more private or contemplative spaces.

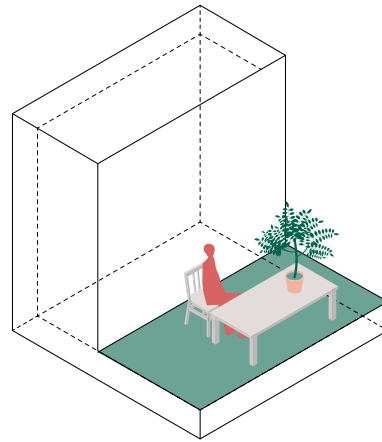
## Entrance winter garden

The thresholds of entering the winter garden at the Blikfabriek are carefully layered. As you approach the entrance, a small bridge carries you over a narrow stretch of water, immediately establishing a sensory connection with the natural element. This water feature continues seamlessly inside, blurring the boundary between exterior and interior environments. Descending steps guide visitors gently downward, amplifying the sense of entering a sheltered, intimate space. This choreography of movement from crossing the bridge to stepping down heightens the experience of arrival, creating a calming sequence that prepares visitors for the sanctuary of the winter garden.



Walking over the bridge over water you are already slowly introduced to the interior.





## Appropriation

appropriation highlights how individuals creatively transform urban spaces through ad hoc, and resourceful interventions. These often spontaneous acts like placing makeshift seating, repurposing objects as tables, or creating personal nooks demonstrate the human desire to carve out pockets of comfort and belonging within the city.

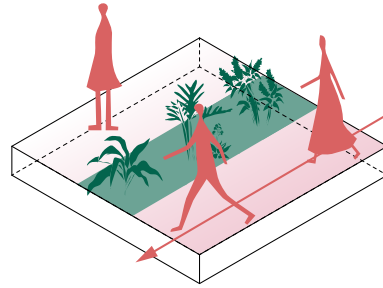
Appropriated spaces are a direct response to user needs, often serving as sanctuaries where none were intentionally designed. These interventions embody a “make-do” approach, turning overlooked spaces into meaningful environments through minimal yet imaginative means. The act of personalizing a public or semi-public space creates a deeper emotional connection between users and their urban surroundings. Appropriated spaces show how urban environments can remain flexible and evolve organically in response to community use.



## Examples of appropriation







## Flow - buffer - tranquil zones

A thoughtful balance between flow zones, buffer zones, and tranquil zones is essential in creating successful urban sanctuaries. Each serves a distinct purpose in structuring movement, providing transitions, and cultivating spaces for stillness. Together, they create a layered experience, guiding users from dynamic areas toward calm, restorative environments.

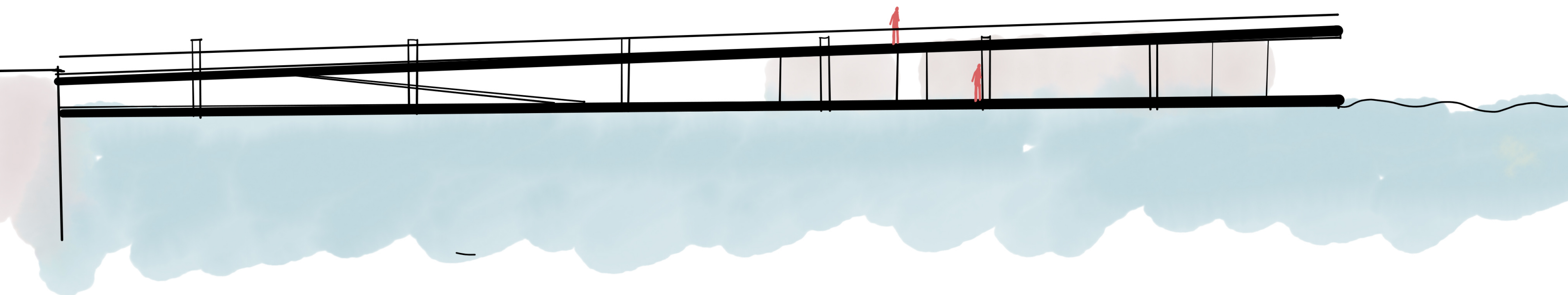
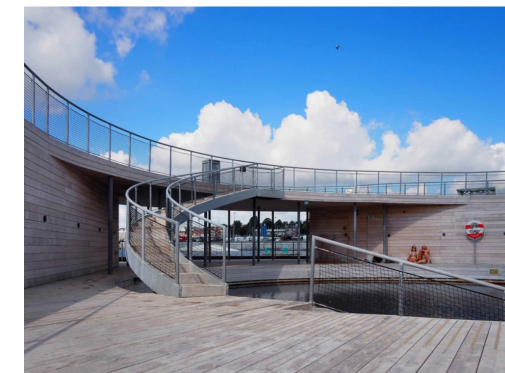
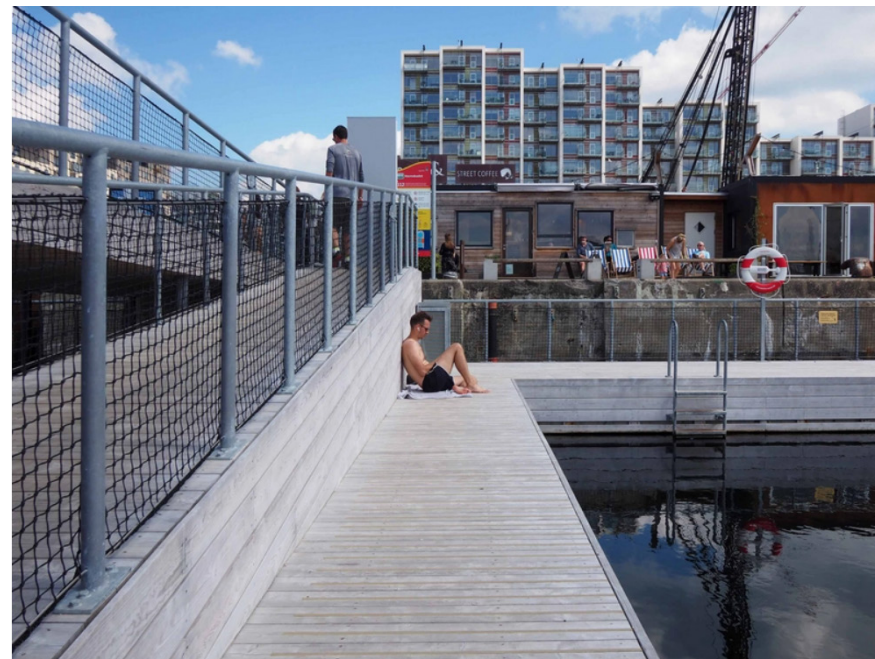
**Flow Zones:** These are spaces of movement, where people pass through or navigate with ease. Effective flow zones help distribute traffic smoothly and set the pace for entering calmer spaces.

**Buffer Zones:** Acting as transitional spaces, buffers gently separate flow zones from tranquil areas, filtering visual, auditory, and spatial disturbances. They play a crucial role in preparing the user for moments of reflection.

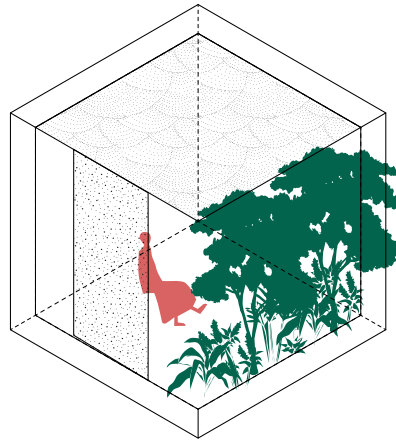
**Tranquil Zones:** These are the core sanctuaries, designed for stillness, contemplation, and connection. They are spaces where the urban pace recedes, and users can pause and recharge.

## Zones in harbor bath

In the Harbor bath the flow zone is around the periphery of the space. The bufferzone in this case is the height, because the flowzone is a story above the tranquil zone. When you are downstairs you feel protected enough to enjoy the bath, but you still notice you are in an urban area.







## Types of enclosure

Enclosure defines the boundaries between a sanctuary and the surrounding urban environment, offering protection, focus, and sometimes a sense of intimacy. However, enclosures need not be fully closed or opaque, permeability and thoughtful design allow for visual, physical, or sensory connections that maintain a relationship with the broader urban landscape while fostering tranquility.

**Solid and Defined Boundaries:** Traditional enclosures, such as walls or thick hedges, create strong separations that block noise, movement, and sightlines, offering a sense of seclusion.

**Semi-Permeable Barriers:** Fences, trellises, or perforated screens provide privacy while maintaining a subtle visual connection to the outside, striking a balance between openness and protection.

**Natural Enclosures:** Elements like tree canopies, densely planted gardens, or topographical changes (hills or berms) form softer, organic enclosures that feel nurturing rather than imposed.

**Implied Boundaries:** Changes in material, elevation, or texture can signal a sense of enclosure without erecting physical barriers, guiding users into tranquil zones without full separation.



## Storm room and winter garden

Natural elements can enclose a space like in the movie the sacrifice by Tarkovski. A grouping of tall trees or a dense garden bed creates a calming cocoon, where foliage gently separates the user from the urban world while allowing filtered light, airflow, and sounds of nature to enter. In the colonnade a piece of fabric is enough to create an enclosure very close to urban life. While still allowing light, air and sound to enter. By playing with the barriers and walls in enclosures you can vary in the amount of exclusion from urban life. These organic enclosures feel more harmonious and less restrictive than built forms.





## Poem

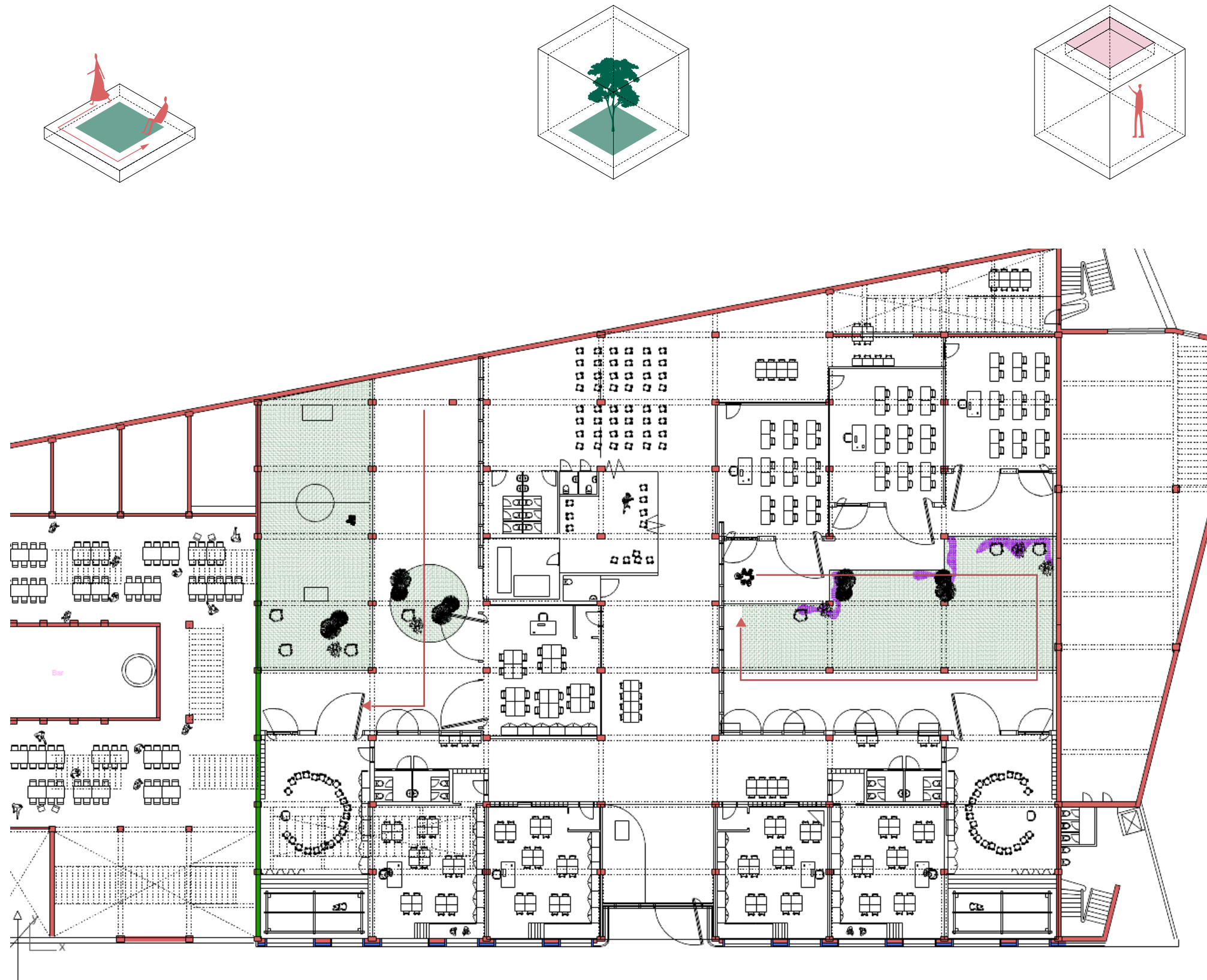
Amidst the hum, the pulse, the bustle,  
Where footsteps chase, lies something subtle,  
A pause, a softened space,  
A quiet corner, a calm embrace.  
Not all is still, yet here, we find,  
A gentle stretch of open mind,  
Where whispers fade and thoughts align  
where tranquility and city entwine.  
It is not the place itself but the combination,  
an encounter of person purpose and location,  
a moment forms perhaps unintended but sure,  
That make the city feel so secure



## Translation to design





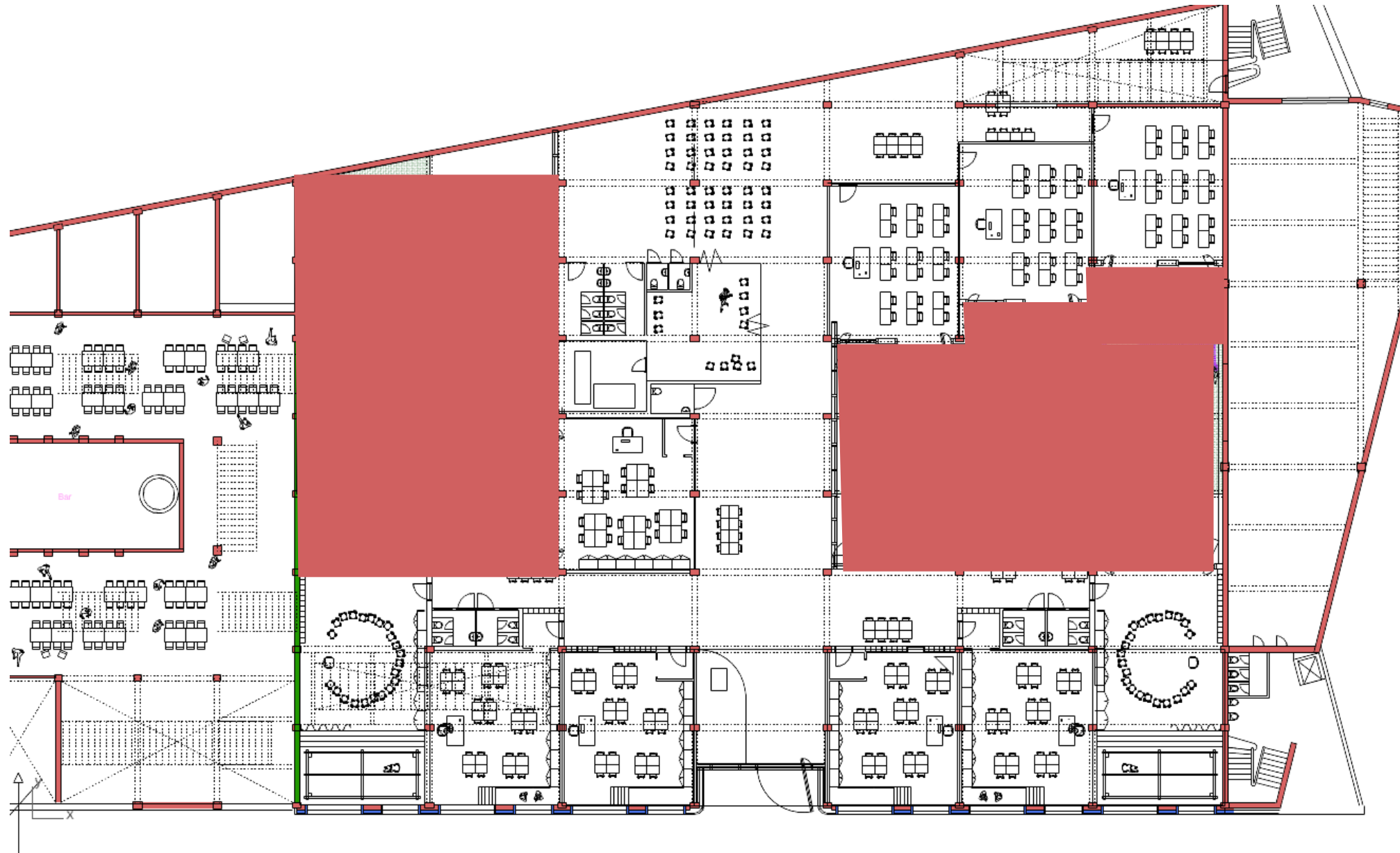
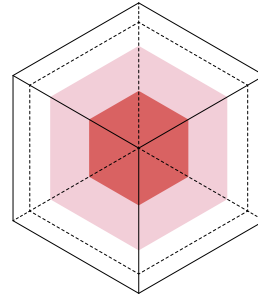


For the inner courtyards in the school I create central biophilic designed courts so it creates a periphery with a central focus. These courtyards will be opened up to the sky.







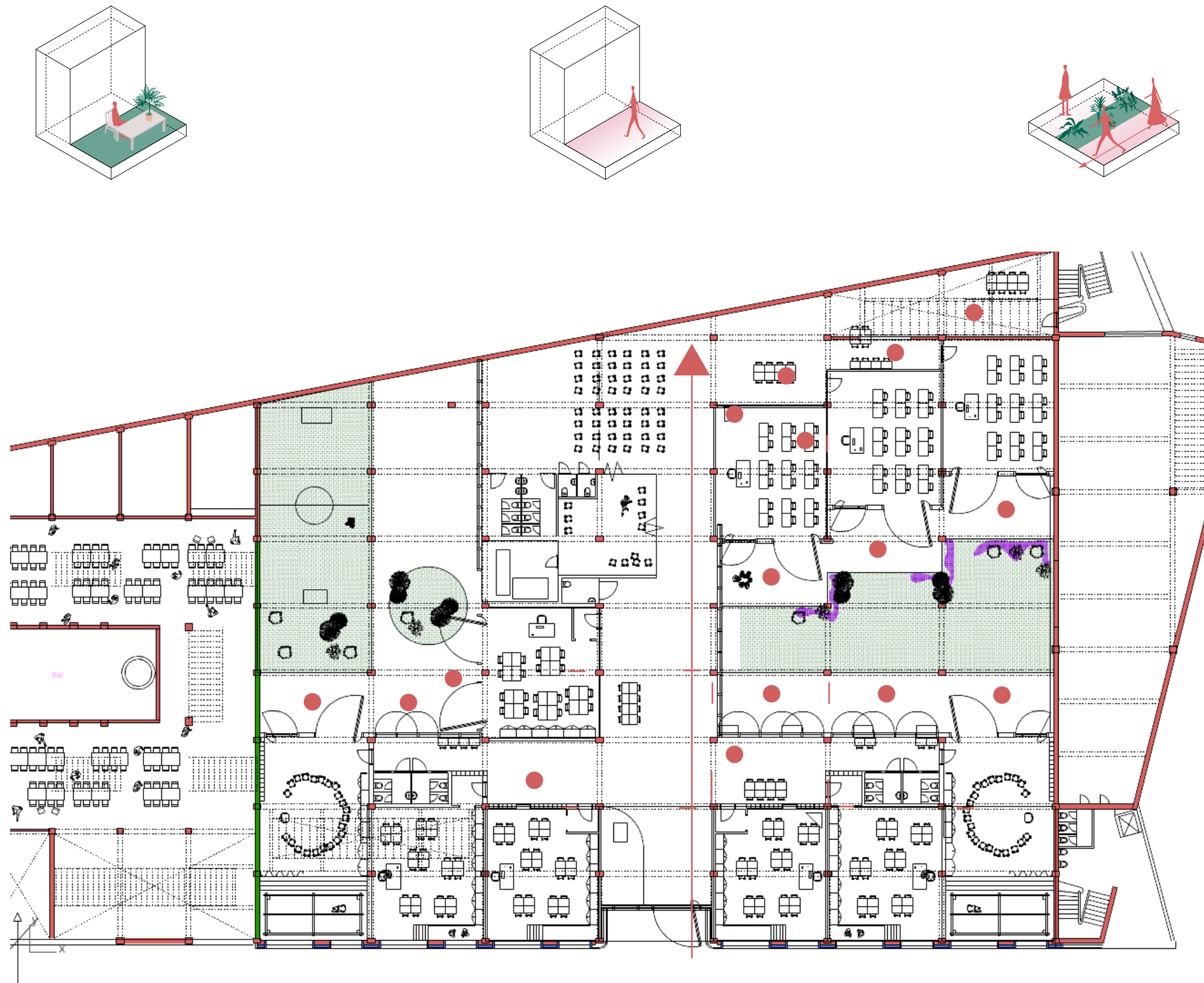


Instead of creating a big square, I try to have different scale of indoor and outdoor spaces. These sometimes contrast with each other to amplify the smaller or larger scale.







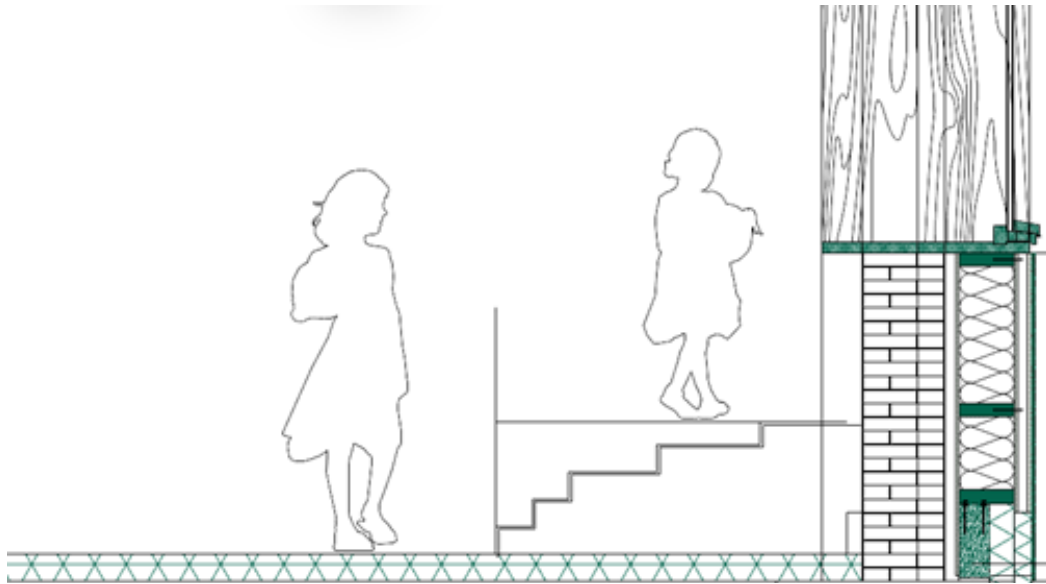


The spots represent the spots that can be appropriated as a working space by the students. The wider hallways leave room for these activities. There are some main flow paths. these have bufferzones before entering the inner courtyard for example.

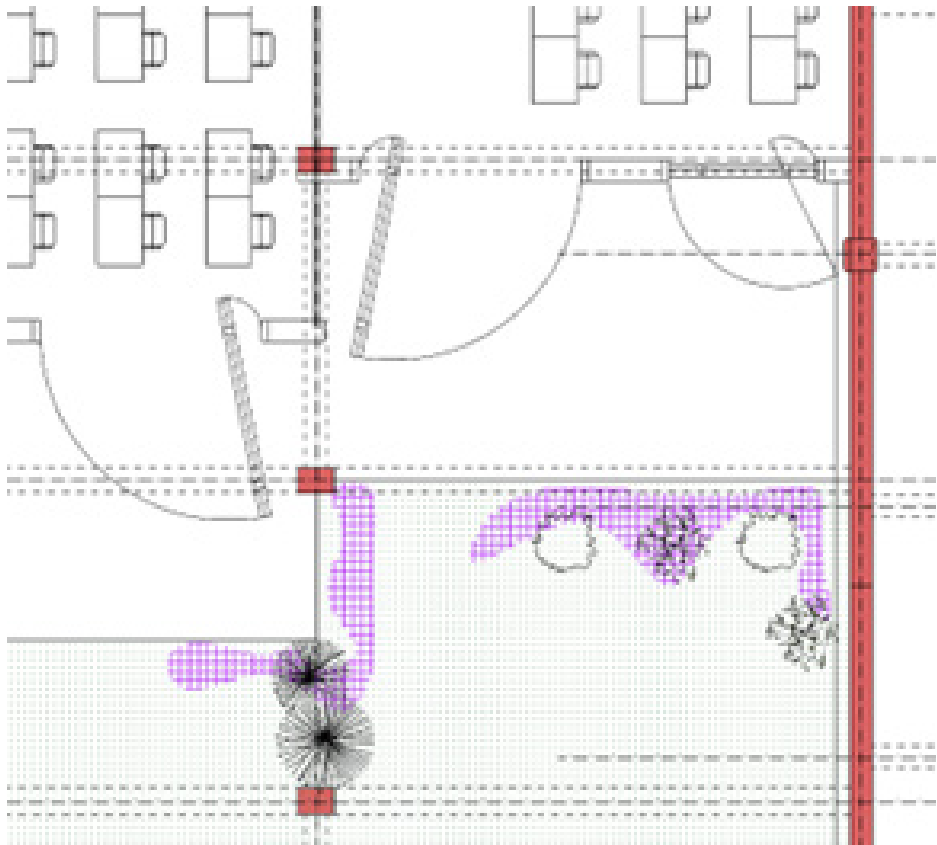
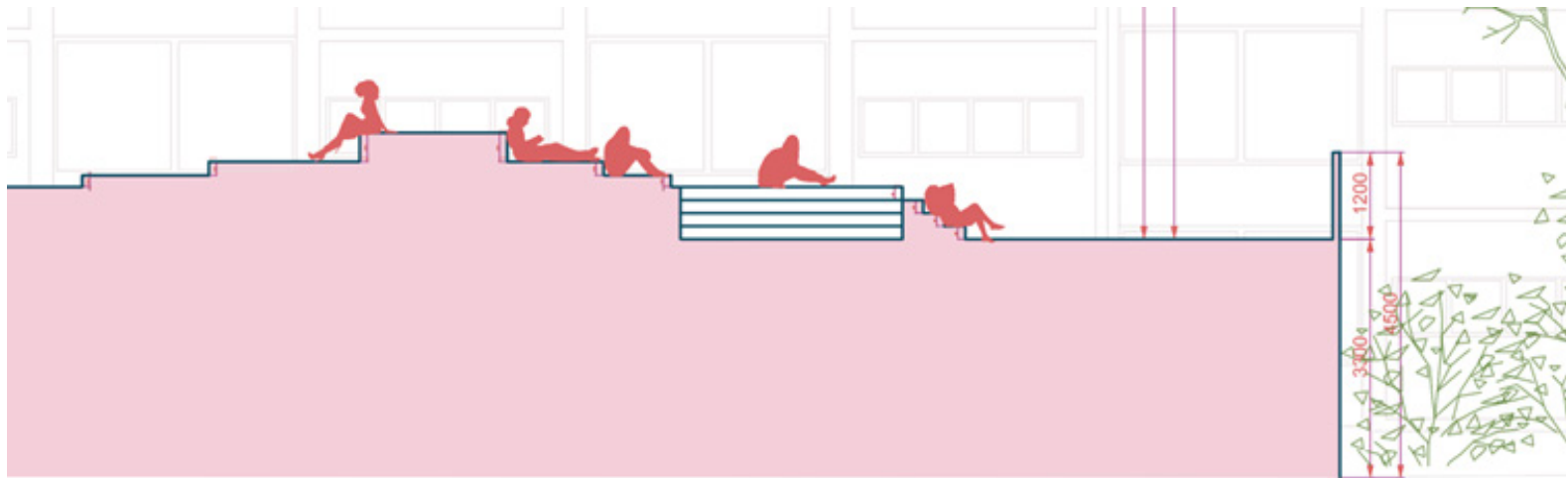






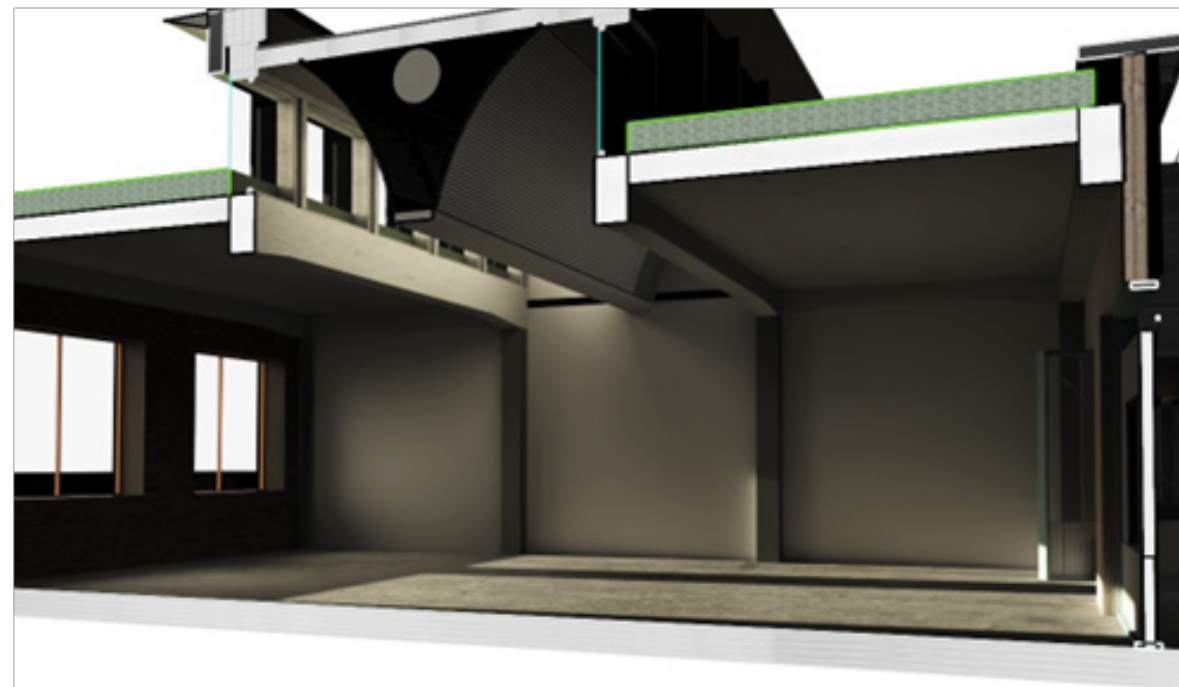
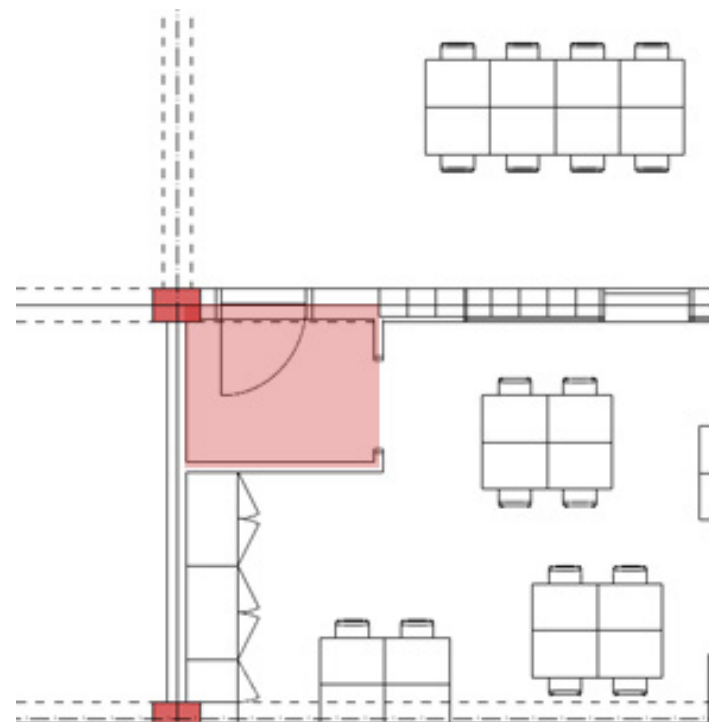


I integrated gardens into the existing structural remains of the site. These gardens include designated zones for outdoor learning, where carefully placed greenery creates small pockets of tranquility.



Throughout the entire school building, I've incorporated subtle spatial transitions, quiet nooks or in-between zones that guide users from more active to more serene environments. The exterior façade is designed to be tactile and approachable, using a variety of human-scale materials such as tiles and bricks that break up the surface rhythmically. At the children's eye level, a clearly defined plinth enhances their sense of scale and connection to the building. The entrance is gently recessed and constructed from warm, soft materials, creating a welcoming threshold that signals the shift from the bustling outside world to a more soothing interior. These thresholds play a key role in both my research and design providing a moment to adapt to changes in pace, sound, and atmosphere.

Inside, the building is designed to guide the senses rather than overwhelm them. Certain features, such as reimagined roof lights, direct attention to natural light without flooding the space or causing distraction. The aim is to create a calm, grounded atmosphere with a controlled sensory environment. For instance, instead of traditional water pipes, water chains are used in the hallways. These provide a soft, ambient sound, stimulating but not overpowering, helping to cultivate a peaceful backdrop rather than sensory overload. The building balances sensory richness with restraint, offering calm, engaging experiences in intentional moments.





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