



CONNECTIVITY CREATES LIVABILITY

**Research plan.
Case study of the
Politiebureau Rademarkt
in Groningen**



Photo from Nieuwsblad van het Noorden. (1995, April 26). *Schoolkinderen maken kunstwerk*. (p. 9)

Research introduction

In 1995, a Dutch newspaper *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* published an article: "Schoolchildren created a work of art". It is a story about a community project, in which local kids were invited to draw on the construction site wall of the Politiebureau Rademarkt one year before finishing its renovation. The construction site fence became a long colourful painting, making the whole environment lively and vibrant. In addition, the project helped kids to interact with their living environment and made them feel involved in the creation of its identity. The project developers found a way to invite the community to be part of the redevelopment changes.

However, the article later explains that at the end of the renovation, the fence will be torn down ("Schoolkinderen maken kunstwerk", 1995). Upon the project completion, a fully isolated facade of Politiebureau Rademarkt

appeared: the walls were solid and closed, the windows were above the human eye level, and the doors looked heavy and unwelcoming. Such an architectural solution did not connect the Politiebureau Rademarkt block with its surroundings. The monofunctional office building stood on its own in Groningen's old town urban fabric just as before the renovation.

This research was motivated by stories like this one. It questions not only the role of singular buildings in the more general urban landscape but also in the neighbourhood's quality of life. Specifically, the hypothesis of the study is the following:

The level of compatibility and unity between a neighbourhood's buildings' scale, functions, and types of facades influences its residents' quality of life.

The quality of life of every square meter in a city is a crucial topic of architecture and urbanism nowadays. Rapid urban sprawl brings various problems such as higher pollution in the cities, increased traffic fatalities or increased car dependency. By 2050 close to 70% of the global population will live in cities (United Nations, 2018). In the midst of this, densification appears to be one of the main solutions. Every square meter and quality of the urban environment matters.

Especially in Groningen where the main case study building of Politiebureau Rademarkt is located. Groningen is growing very fast: according to the statistics, the municipality of Groningen has grown by more than 50.000 inhabitants in the period of 10 to 15 years (Data Commons, 2020).

The city grows faster than ever and it puts the living environment under pressure. As the municipality of Groningen states the main challenge nowadays is to find a good balance between various functions, interests, wishes and quality of the living environment (Gemeente Groningen, 2018, p. 1). In other words, the livability of a city is a focus point. Even a comprehensive

document, published in 2018 by the municipality, describing the priorities and visions of the city of Groningen has a bold statement on the cover "Groningen's quality of life - first". Though Groningen is ranked as one of the top ten cities in Europe to live according to the "Quality of life in European cities survey" published in 2020 (European Commission), the municipality of Groningen states that it is a challenge to stay in high positions when the city grows rapidly and still there are places that are not as developed, areas which could improve the livability and quality of the surroundings (Gemeente Groningen, 2018, p. 4).

The quality and livability of the living environment are crucial topics to the area where Politiebureau Rademarkt is located. The oldest inner part of the city is the most densified area surrounded by historical fortifications and canals. Even though Groningen's centre is the most vibrant and attractive place in the municipality, a massive modernist style Politiebureau urban block forms an isolated island in the most attractive historical part of the city. Connectivity between the building and its surroundings does not exist.



Urban context of the Politiebureau Rademarkt building . Photo from personal archive, 2021

Research aims

An important critique on the modern urban development process was raised by Roger Trancik (1986, p. 1):

“The usual process of urban development treats buildings as isolated objects sited in the landscape, not as part of the larger fabric of streets, squares, and viable open space. Decisions about growth patterns are made from two-dimensional land-use plans, without considering the three-dimensional relationship between buildings and spaces and without a real understanding of human behavior.”

By studying the importance of the connection between buildings, I want to answer the following research question:

- *How does the interaction between buildings and residents influence the livability in the inner part of Groningen?*

To answer this question, this study will employ the Politiebureau Rademarkt building as the main example case. Different methods will be used, including the analysis of the Post-war period architectural influence, interviews of the neighbourhood’s residents, and visiting the location. There will be separate chapters that will overview different aspects of the interaction between buildings and residents and their influence on the livability of Groningen’s city. After primary research of the Politiebureau Rademarkt, the three focus points as scale, function and street life were chosen to analyze:

- *How does **the scale** of the Politiebureau Rademarkt influence the livability of its surroundings?*

- *How does **the function** of Politiebureau Rademarkt cause the isolation of buildings and their surroundings?*

- *How specific design tools can help to create active **streetlife** in Politiebureau Rademarkt surroundings?*

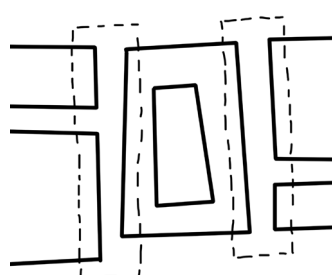
This research aims to understand why space can either isolate or connect its residents or community members. Moreover, one of the goals of this research paper is to prepare the theoretical and empirical argumentation for redesigning proposals of the Politiebureau Rademarkt building in Groningen.

Definitions

Two definitions will be widely used throughout the research: *livability* and *community or residents*.

Urbanist Jan Gehl analyzes that the livability of spaces is unambiguously related to active urban life. He compares the term “livability” with the living room. “In the living room, all members of the family can be occupied with various activities at the same time, but individual activities and people can also function together” (Gehl, 2011, p. 107).

Other terms widely used in the research will be *residents* or *community*. They describe a group of people living in the same area or having particular characteristics in common (Merriam-Webster, 2021).



SCALE



FUNCTION



STREETLIFE

Personal interest

Building as the background of daily life

Besides being a student, I am also an architecture photographer. My job is to express architectural ideas solely through imagery: I cannot use words or any other means. After years of working in this field, I have realized that one of the best methods to capture the essence of a building is observing and picturing people interacting with architecture and the space around it. I realised that the context, the environment are as important as the building itself. I have learned to use a similar approach when working with architecture projects. I find it interesting and fascinating how much the building's interconnectedness with the surroundings impacts the general feeling while being in that space.

Theoretical framework

"Cultures and climates differ all over the world but people are the same. They'll gather in public if you give them a good place to do it" urbanist Jan Gehl stated (Project for public spaces, 2008). In other words, the livability of spaces determines the quality of life. This is the main focus point in Politiebureau Rademarkt building research that will be analyzed by interviews of residents, people passing by the building and users of the building. Moreover, this research will be based on existing studies about the quality of urban life done mainly by sociologists, urbanists and architects. Historical development analysis of the city of Groningen and Politiebureau Rademarkt will help to understand the values of the area and historical layers that could generate ideas for the building transformation proposals.

Methodology

The framework of this research plan divides the main research question into three sub-categories, listed as questions in the previous chapter. This research will focus on the aspects that define the interaction between buildings and their communities: urban context and its scale, the functional

aspects, and the street-level quality. Each subtopic is connected to theoretical, historical and practical references:

*How does **the scale of Politiebureau Rademarkt influence the livability of its surroundings?***

Historical research. The Politiebureau Rademarkt building is located in Groningen old town's urban structure, formed and surrounded by a defensive wall from the XIII century. Today this part of the old town is the centre of Groningen city. Built in 1971, the massive Politiebureau Rademarkt represents the Post War architectural period and contrasts with its old town urban fabric. In 2013, an extensive document "Cultuurhistorische verkenning. Binnenstad Groningen" was published by the municipality of Groningen that covers the historical development of the inner city of Groningen where the building is located. This document will be used as a base for historical research. **Outcome:** To understand the historical development of the area and how it can influence the design strategies.

Emotional mapping. Emotional mapping will be drawn during different site visits. Weather conditions, time of the day and day of the week will be considered. **Outcome:** This research method helps to understand the urban context of the building and its connection to it.

Literature research. For the literature research, I focus on the different keywords that are connected to the subquestion. Those keywords and literature are stated below:

Urban block

"Het hofje 1400 –2000. (On)zichtbare bouwstenen van de Hollandse stad"
Doctoral thesis by Willemijn Wilms Floet
Carola Hein on the Tatami mat: Floor Cover, Building Block and Lifestyle

Identity

"Collage City" by Colin Row

Scale

"Design of Cities" by Edmund Bacon

Morphology

"Urban space" by Rob Krier

Outcome: To understand how the scale of the building reflects on its surroundings and how it is analyzed from an academic point of view.

Group work: Spatial building typology (SBT). SBT research covers four different scales of eight different projects including Politiebureau Rademarkt. **Outcome:** comparing projects in the city centre, urban block, building object and details level. Historical development of an urban block and structural possibilities are the main focus points for the Politiebureau Rademarkt building.

Value assessment. Value assessment will be based on historical, aesthetical, scientific, political, age, economic, social, ecological and other values. **Outcome:** Value assessment will become one of the main tools for redesigning proposals.

*How does **the function** of Politiebureau Rademarkt cause the isolation of buildings and their surroundings?*

Reference projects. Historically, there are many examples of big functional buildings (or even complexes) in the central areas of old towns: massive hospital blocks, prisons, castles, or courts. Usually, just like the Politiebureau Rademarkt, these buildings were partially or fully closed to the public due to their functions. De Noordsingel or the Fenix I transformations in Rotterdam are one of the reference projects. **Outcome:** By checking reference projects to understand what are the possibilities for transformation of the Politiebureau Rademarkt urban block.

Historical research. Politiebureau Rademarkt building was built in 1971 and renovated in 1996 by *De Zwarte Hond* architecture office. Groningen archive provides drawings of construction and renovation. **Outcome:** By checking

documents and drawings the aim is to understand how the building architecturally evolved during different periods. Comparison of development and structure possibilities of transformation of the function will be made.

Interviews. The interview with Jurjen van der Meer, the founder of *De Zwarte Hond*, will be performed. This architecture office redesigned the Politiebureau Rademarkt in 1996. **Outcome:** the aim is to understand why specific decisions were made and what were the values of the building from the *De Zwarte Hond* office perspective.

Interviews with the neighbours. Interviews of residents living next to the Politiebureau Rademarkt will be performed. The main questions will cover the functionality of the building, advantages and disadvantages of the neighbourhood, residents perceptions and suggestions. **Outcome:** This qualitative research will help to understand local problems, perception of the building, possibilities of the redesign and new functions.

Building visits and interviews with police officers. Politiebureau Rademarkt is a monofunctional building protected by security due to its function. It works as an isolated island in the historical urban context. **Outcome:** Visiting the building helps to understand how that island functions and what are the possibilities for its redevelopment. Interviews with the police officers will provide information about the advantages and disadvantages of the building.

*How specific design tools can help to create active **street life** in Politiebureau Rademarkt surroundings?*

Photo documentation. First of all, historical pictures from the archives will be analyzed. Then together with the interviews residents will be asked to share their personal pictures of Politiebureau surroundings. Thirdly, pictures will be taken from residents apartments towards one of the Politiebureau facades. Afterwards, all

of them will be combined in a structural way and analyzed. **Outcome:** By using photography as a tool I want to analyse what is the perception of Politiebureau from the residents perspective. Also, this research method helps to understand the visual connections to the surroundings.

Cognitive mapping. People passing by the Politiebureau Rademarkt or living in the neighbourhood will be asked to draw a quick sketch how do they remember Politiebureau Rademarkt without looking at it. **Outcome:** This exercise helps to understand what is the identity of the building and how it is being recognised.

Design toolbox research. In 2017, the municipality of Groningen published a comprehensive document "Nieuwe Stadsruimtes" covering the possible design proposals for the inner part of the city. **Outcome:** Analysis of the document that helps to understand the characteristics of Groningen's old town streets and possible redesign decisions.

Literature research. For the literature research, I focus on the different keywords that are connected to the subquestion. Those keywords and literature is stated below:

Edge

"Finding lost space" by Roger Trancik

Ground floor and active street life

"Life between buildings" by Jan Gehl

"Cities for people" by Jan Gehl

"How to study public life" by Jan Gehl and Birgitte Svarre

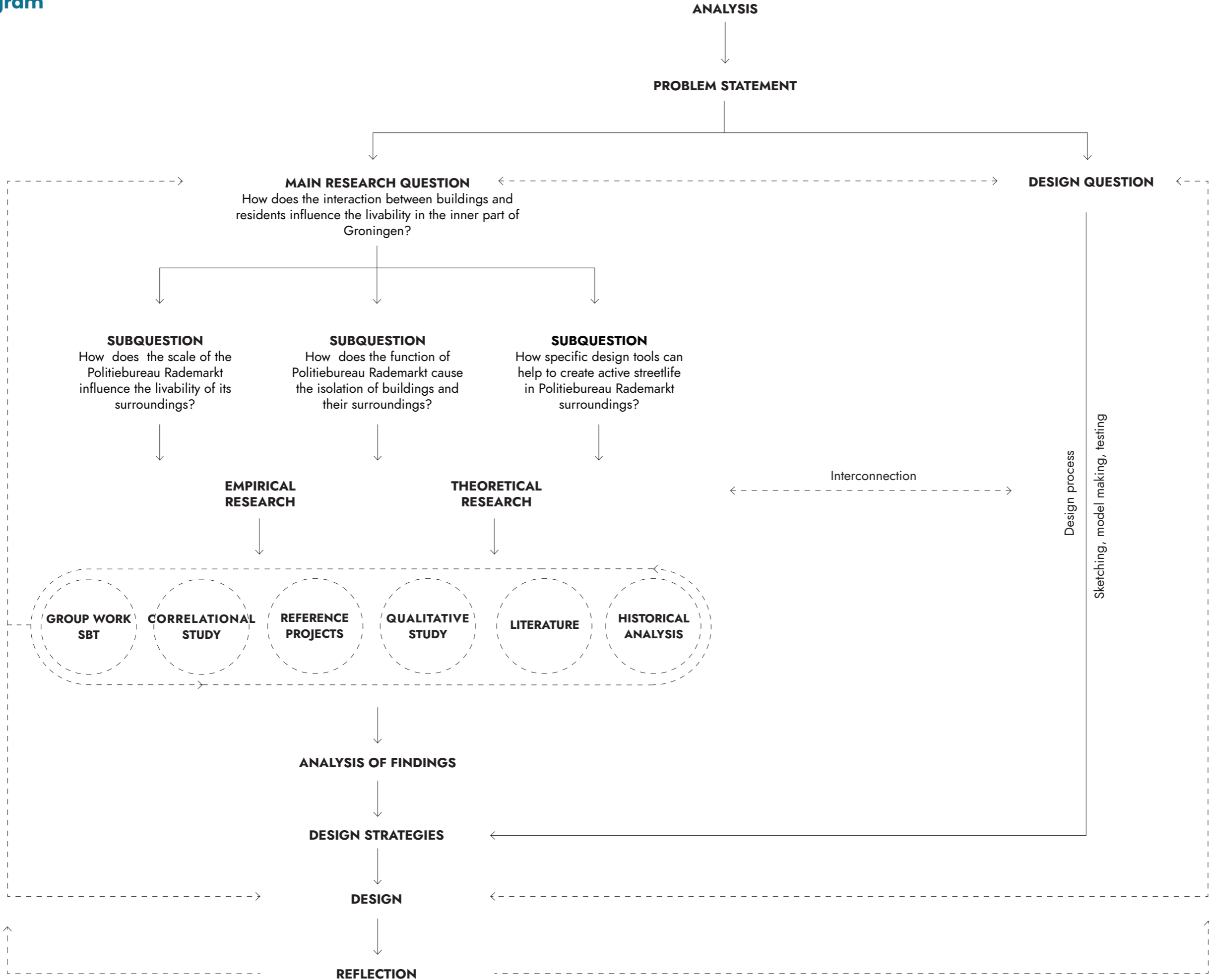
"Soft city" by David Sim

Outcome: Analysis of public life and importance of street level. Its reflection on the Politiebureau Rademarkt building.

Video material. The sociological analysis by Richard Sennett on the "Open city" topic will be used together with the research on Politiebureau Rademarkt streetlife.

Outcome: The sociological aspects of the Politiebureau Rademarkt case study.

Research diagram



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