

Bricolage

Reflection

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My thesis 'Common Ground' explores the notion of social space, investigating how architectural invention could democratise the public realm of Nijmegen. This agenda was inspired by initial fieldwork research, in which I discovered that Nijmegen has a heterogeneous population of different subcultures, social groups and nationalities that create a vibrant community. However, the public realm does not currently reflect the bricolage society of Nijmegen, and instead mirrors the capitalist agenda of the global retail industry. Shops dominate the city centre, providing a limited realm for social interaction or participation between residents. Furthermore, ownership analysis of the city highlights the poor participation of the residents in making the city. I therefore propose a redefinition of the Molenpoort plot from a dilapidated shopping mall to a community centre and coworking space for local businesses, aimed at strengthening the social and economic structures of the city.

This thesis is deeply rooted in the studio themes of bricolage and reuse, interpreting them as an approach to architecture that facilitates and enhances the practices of everyday life. These themes have guided my design and research process throughout the year, providing meaning and inspiration to all my design decisions. The act of bricolage encouraged me to interrogate the found materials of the site and the wider context of Nijmegen, trying "to discover new significances and new possibilities" within the existing conditions.¹ This approach guided my initial research phase, working collectively with other students to observe, analyse and catalogue the tangible and intangible qualities of the site to comprehend the context we were working within. These catalogues explored Nijmegen through an investigation of the city, its people, and the materials of the Molenpoort. Each research booklet inspired different aspects of my design at different phases of the project, keeping the act of bricolage alive throughout my design process.

The first catalogue, the 'A-Z encyclopaedia of the Nijmegenaar' represents a body of collective ethnographic fieldwork from the P1 phase of my thesis. This research developed organically by visiting Nijmegen and approaching locals on the street to talk to them about their stories, lives, and connections to the city. We built relationships with the residents by interviewing, recording, photographing, and sketching them in their surroundings. The catalogue represents a sample of 26 of these interviewees, organised as personal profiles that illustrate their everyday lives and connections to the city. We also depicted the narratives and lives of nine of these residents in detail in our P1 film, 'Nijmegen Through Their Eyes' which illustrated the personal landmarks of the residents in a paper model, pop-out theatre set portraying the rhythm of the city.

To draw conclusions from this research, we extracted the quantitative data from our personal profiles to compare our sample of 26 Nijmegenaaars on the basis of age range, ethnicity, and gender distribution. Our methodology entailed mapping each person as a triangle which is formed by plotting three points on the map, each representing where they live, work, and spend leisure time. By connecting these three dots a triangle is created which illustrates each person's 'sphere of influence' in Nijmegen. From this information, we created three maps which categorise our sample in terms of age range, ethnicity, and gender. As a comparison, we also extracted general demographic data of Nijmegen in the same neighbourhoods to compare the raw data to our findings across the same categories. These maps revealed that different communities in the city tend to dwell in different areas. We found that in our sample, typically immigrants live in the south of the city, whilst natives tend to live around the city centre. In terms of age distribution, we found a higher concentration of elderly people dwelling in the city centre and towards the waterfront when compared to neighbourhoods in the south east of the city towards Radboud University, where the student population largely resides. The intersecting point of different demographic groups is indicated on the maps as the city centre, specifically Grote Markt and the Waalkade. This illustrates the potential for our site to become a key node for social interaction and exchange.

This research however cannot comprehensively represent the entire population of the city as we are only representing the information of 26 individuals that we encountered on the streets around the city centre. Our data would have therefore been different if we ventured further out into the more residential, industrial, or rural areas of Nijmegen as we would have encountered different people with different 'spheres of influence'. However, this data is relevant in forming an image of the city based on the inhabitants we studied in our encyclopaedia and film.

This initial ethnographic fieldwork formed an inspiring basis from which my programmatic and theoretical design work developed. The interviews also inspired our urban vision to utilise the existing parking deck of the Molenpoort as raised public space. Several interviewees expressed a desire for more open public space in the city centre. Such as Eric, a music therapy student, who criticised the current public space in the Nijmegen stating that "Plein 1944 used to be a nice open area, for people just to hang out, skate...and now it's all bricks and buildings. I think it was nicer when it was just one space in the middle with grass, maybe some terrace...it would be nice to have an open space".² Our urban proposal breathes new life into the Molenpoort by providing gifts back to the city, such as turning the parking deck into elevated public space which can be accessed via two ramps, connecting two sides of the city through a new pedestrian route.

For my second catalogue, studying the 'Socio-Spatial Practices of Nijmegen' in collaboration with Jasmine, we analysed a series of actions observed in Nijmegen's public space from a plan, eye level and exploded axonometric perspective to investigate the fixed, semi-fixed and non-fixed elements in the space that provided the affordance for such action. From this research we drew conclusions to formulate an agenda on how to design effective public spaces that can allow for different sensibilities and actions within the same space. This agenda directly inspired ideas for our designs. We also analysed at a human scale how the body reacts to spaces, not only from an ergonomic perspective, but also in terms of cultural gestures. I intend to continue to illustrate the embodied experience of architecture through perspective and exploded drawings to represent the configurations of spaces in my design at the final presentation.

When moving from this ethnographic research to design, I began to question the role of the architect in designing public space. I was wary of projecting my assumptions of what the space should or could be used for, as we observed in our research that the most unexpected uses of space were the most vibrant. During the design phase, I therefore interrogated the degree to which I should choreograph my spaces for certain actions, or leave unprogrammed to allow for unexpected use. I questioned which approach would be more effective in encouraging the community to appropriate my design with the patterns of their everyday lives. Through this process, I discovered that the traces of the Molenpoort left as showcase pieces in my design provided an existing layer of memory to the space which are exposed, rough and messy. These scars from the original design may inspire future users to feel more comfortable in altering and appropriating the building over time.

As we progressed from an architectural scale to a study of material culture, I devised the third catalogue, the 'Material Inventory of the Molenpoort' together with my original P1 group. This research followed a more practical approach; measuring, drawing, and cataloguing the existing elements and materials of the Molenpoort that could be reused in our designs. Through this exercise, I learnt more about the existing building and was able to draw inspiration from the elements we catalogued, utilising them as showcase pieces in my design. Also, where possible I reinvented new uses for these elements as an act of bricolage, such as reusing old bricks as furnishing elements in my public space. This idea was complimented by our guest critic, Jan de Vylder, during my P3 presentation and he questioned "how will people understand they are reused? Would you slice them out of a wall and leave the cut exposed?".³ These ideas probed me to think in further detail about the act of reusing materials and the physical process it entails.

2. Gillett, Louise. Eric . Other, September 19, 2020.

3. de Vylder, Jan, and Inge Vinck. "Bricologics." Urban Architecture . Lecture, April 8, 2021. .

An important aspect of my research process was the collective effort in creating these catalogues. The collective ethos of the studio has benefitted my design process, allowing us to create greater and stronger volumes of work due to our alliances. We also formed meaningful relationships between students through this process, acting as a support network to each other throughout the year.

These three catalogues were integral to my research process and provided a strong basis for my design to develop upon. However, I was unable to fulfil all my initial intentions that I had set out in my research plan. Originally, I envisaged developing my ethnographic research further by designing and constructing an installation for Nijmegen residents to interact with, so I could engage with community and harness their mutual knowledge to inform my design process. On reflection, this research method was overly ambitious, especially with the risks imposed by the coronavirus restrictions. Instead, I reached out to residents and local businesses through email to gauge their views in the early stages of my design. Community engagement in university projects remains a challenging issue as the designs remain hypothetical. However, I am pleased with the ethnographic fieldwork we were able to carry out during the early stages of the project before the lockdown.

On reflection, my research and design process has not been strictly linear, instead my design has benefited from continual research even in the later stages of my project. For example, research has played a crucial role when designing the building technology details of my design, exploring topics such as designing for disassembly as I am mindful of the future potential of my new structure. Also in my architectural work, I have been researching at a smaller scale how the body reacts to the spaces I have designed, exploring the material culture and embodied experience of architecture. These studies allow me to speculate and explore potential scenarios in my design that I observed in the socio-spatial practices catalogue.

Ultimately, 'Common Ground' addresses relevant social and environmental issues in Nijmegen, highlighting how existing buildings can be reused for the reclamation of public space. Common Ground provides an alternative to the existing public realm, creating an opportunity for residents to build a new relationship to their city and community. My design also proposes an alternative solution to the municipalities' redevelopment plans of the Molenpoort site. They plan to demolish the Molenpoort to open up a series of routes through the site and to Vlaamsegras alleyway. Five new residential mixed-use buildings are proposed, one of which is targeted at high-income living to provide a more 'favourable' view of the city to tourists and visitors. I am extremely critical of these plans as they disregard the social problems in the city and neglect the needs of residents who currently reside in this area, displacing them in favour of more affluent residents. Instead, I propose utilising the existing structure of the Molenpoort to breathe new life into the site.

Furthermore, I believe the studio themes of reuse and bricolage are extremely relevant in the wider architectural profession as we should actively encourage adaptive reuse to help tackle the climate crisis. As asserted by recent Pritzker prize winners Lacaton & Vassal "never demolish, never replace".⁴ This thesis emphasises the creative potential in reuse and using what is at hand. In this vein, I have also considered the future use of my project, designing my new additions as a flexible, lightweight structure that can be disassembled. I have also provided a generous amount of open, unprogrammed space in my plans to cater to the needs of our ever-changing society. The ambitions of my thesis can be summarised perfectly by guest critic Jan de Vylder. When reflecting on the concepts of reuse, pre-use, and future use he mused that "at the end of the day it is all about use".⁵ Common Ground endeavours to provide democratic public space that serves the local community of Nijmegen, in the past, present and future.

4. Waite, Richard. "Never Demolish, Never Replace": Retrofit Aces Lacaton and Vassal Win 2021 Pritzker Prize." *The Architects' Journal*, March 17, 2021. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/never-demolish-never-replace-retrofit-aces-lacaton-and-vassal-win-2021-pritzker-prize>.

5. de Vylder, Jan, and Inge Vinck. "Bricologics." *Urban Architecture*. Lecture, April 8, 2021.