

The Research Catalogue of

Between Thresholds and Silhouettes
Unlocking Agency with the Youth in Hoboken and Kiel

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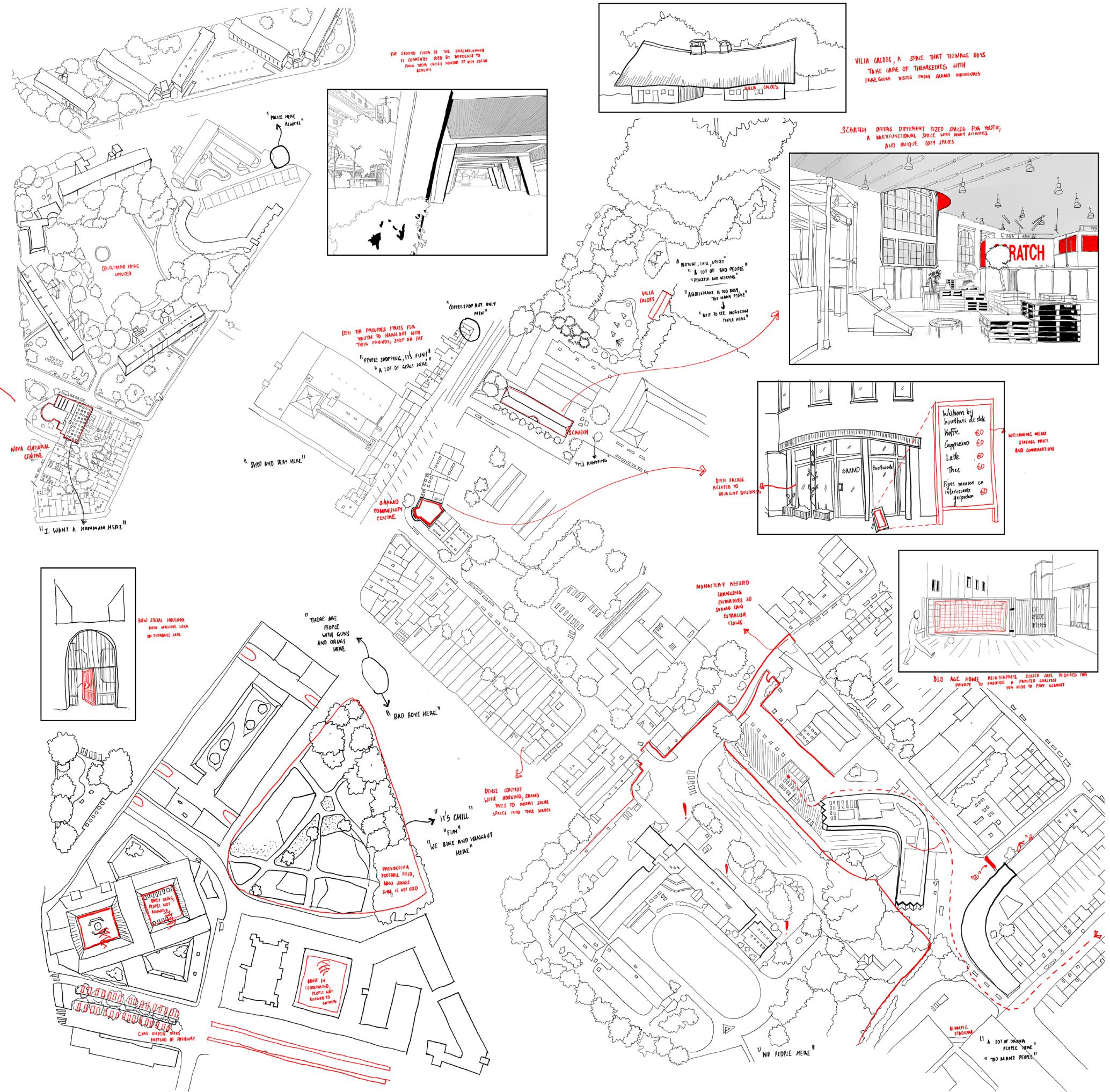
The Research drawing contains insights from the year related to observational research, ethnographic interviews and narrative mapping workshops with the youth of Hoboken and Kiel.

How to read this drawing?

The drawing on the left consists of the building site visualised through physical and perceived borders. This segregates the site into many accessible “fronts” and “inaccessible” backs and points of intrigue in happening upon a place that you don’t know whether you are welcome or not.

On the right, is Hoboken and Kiel, and specific places of importance related to visualising safety and risk. There are community organisations like SAAMO, Nova and Scratch that are analysed to find key clues in layout, functions, facade treatments, colour etc that affords comfort to its users. Hoboken and Kiel have a very dense residential footprint and these organisations find key physical insertions in order to connect to the community, i.e, the Kloostertuin by SAAMO. Workshop insights from the youth aged 13-24, are represented in quotes in black colour. The flip-open sections provide greater insight into unlocking the potential of the different spaces or what features make them appeal to the youth.





Reflection

Introduction

The project tries to unlock the potential of urban spaces through the lens of risk and safety, with a focus on public spaces in Hoboken and Kiel. A greater question persisted throughout: how does architecture contribute to the perception of safety in urban environments?

One's experience of space is shaped by various factors, including social, political, cultural, and personal considerations. A single space can evoke vastly different feelings in individuals, depending on their upbringing and background, gender, social standing, etc. Different feelings can arise from being in a space that doesn't seem to be or is not meant for you.

Unsafe. Cautious. Watched. Mischievous. Rebellious. Playful. Excited.

Youth in Hoboken and Kiel experience public space as hostile or alienating especially when they feel watched, unsafe or excluded. Frank Furedi's notion that risk evaluation is central to modern society's understanding of public spaces resonates with this context, as increased surveillance and the policing of youth in these neighbourhoods limit opportunities for meaningful social encounters.

Even though there are 10+ schools in the wider Hoboken and Kiel area, the youth exist as a transient element in the public realm, unwelcome and cast away. Circumstances where the police even ask for your ID when you move in groups of more than three. This speaks to the larger issue of surveillance, control, and a lack of inclusive public design for minorities.

Research Methodology and Approach

Working with my group during P1, we not only looked at the "neighbours" of the neighbourhood, listened to stories of over policing, spatial exclusion, lack of public spaces, but also talked about the intricate ways of building community with bottom-up interventions. The focus was on understanding the social and physical boundaries within the neighbourhoods of Hoboken and Kiel. It unearthed a patchwork of informal public space consisting of parochial third spaces and fourth spaces. This pointed to the question,

Is there a coding to spaces in terms of symbols that influence people's perception of safety?

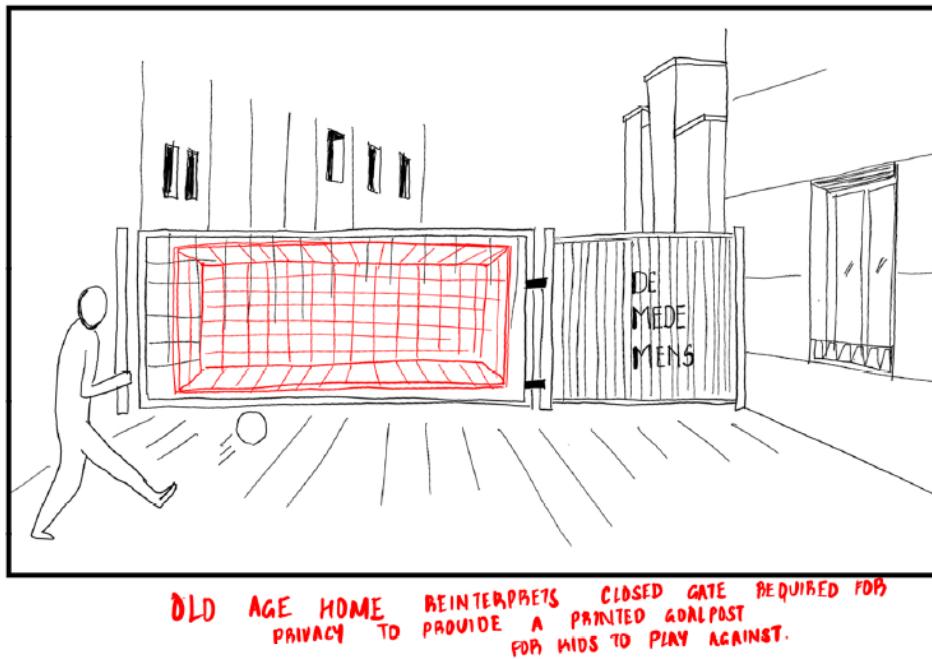
Initial analysis of the site revealed various spatial limitations, such as fences, accessible "front" and inaccessible "back" regions and segregated zones, which contributed to feelings of exclusion, particularly among the youth. A deep dive into these divisions uncovered the underlying social, racial, and gender dynamics. Throughout the project, the approach to research was primarily ethnographic and participatory in nature, using qualitative tools such as interviews, workshops with mapping exercises and long-term fieldwork.

Master planning helped hone in on this notion of safety by preserving known paths, pedestrianizing the Kru-gerstraat, Weerstandlaan, creating residential hubs with courtyards and activated by commercial activities and parochial spaces on the ground floor. The concept was to create welcoming, layered thresholds through parochial spaces like community kitchens and food halls. Urban farming became a phased strategy — introduced first to build trust and community ownership before housing and public spaces were introduced, as a deterrent to gentrification.

The methodology often unearthed contradictory narratives from the community. The biggest strength with this approach was its ability to build trust through multiple visits that yielded unexpected insights. By working with residents, the youth and social workers and analysing these findings, I developed design strategies for an inclusive youth centre. The key idea was to foster a sense of ownership and inclusion by introducing shared spaces that were responsive to the needs of the youth. The project was trying to strike a balance between familiar models of public spaces and adopting functions that could bring a vibrant heterotopia for the youth. The introduction of culturally meaningful elements, such as bathhouses for Moroccan and Turkish communities, anchored the design in its social context.

Relationship Between Research and Design

The research conducted throughout the project directly influenced the design development. The insights gathered from community engagement were crucial in determining the functions (youth center, bathhouse and community garden) and their spatial configurations. For example, ethnographic workshops with youth (ages 13–24) helped reveal specific desires for ownership, separation (especially by sex), and intimacy in space. These inputs were tested through iterative sketching and conceptual modelling. Feedback loops formed — one moment of fieldwork could radically reframe the direction of the design. For example, teenagers using the gate of the old age home as a goalpost highlighted the need to allow space for spontaneity and repurposing. This led to the inclusion of multifunctional spaces that could be easily adapted for a variety of uses, ensuring they met the diverse needs of the community over time while also having sections that could be closed off to the youth only.



The integration of such culturally relevant spaces within the larger context of the youth centre helped ensure that the design was not only inclusive but also sensitive to the cultural dynamics of the area. These considerations guided the development of spaces that were both adaptive and responsive to the community's needs.

In P2 and P3, this dialogue intensified. I was pushed to zoom out. To understand how even small interventions respond to broader systems of regulation, racial politics, and surveillance. The youth center spaces weren't just programmatic decisions, they were architectural responses to what people needed and what the space was denying them.

The studio

I learned to slow down, to listen, to pull at many threads before tying anything down. Initially, I thought I knew what the community needed. But fieldwork challenged that. The studio's emphasis on spatial justice and care in design helped shift my mindset from "solving a problem" to making space with and for others.

I also became more intentional in choosing methods. Model-making, something I had less experience with, became an unexpected strength. It allowed me to test ideas at a micro-scale — how one spatial fragment could embody tension, risk, retreat, or belonging. Workshops became key tools not just for extracting data but building relationships and earning trust. I now see research as something that continues through all stages of design, not just the beginning.

What would I have done differently?

Looking back, I would have dedicated more time to speaking with youth center workers and social workers. They have a deeper understanding of long-term community dynamics, and these insights could have strengthened the core of the project. At times I felt overwhelmed by the number of “threads” I was pulling at, the challenge was how to narrow them without losing nuance. I’m still figuring out how to frame a convincing storyline when the research opens up many equally valid directions.

Another reflection, I often entered conversations with a set agenda. Moving forward, I want to be more open and improvisational, to let people guide me through their stories instead of extracting answers. The more I let go, the more the project grew into something real.

Relevance to wider context

The project addresses the regulation of public life, especially for marginalised youth. It explores how spatial coding, through design, symbolism, or surveillance, creates or denies belonging. By working with risky, safe and uncanny spaces, I aimed to reveal architecture’s power in shaping emotion, behaviour, and social structure.

Academically, the project contributes to ongoing discourse around spatial justice, public space design and politics of surveillance. By foregrounding the views and thoughts of the youth, an often-underrepresented group in the architectural process, the project seeks to propose new ways of thinking about ownership, informality and risk assessment in urban design. Informed consent and anonymity were key principles in respecting the participants time and narratives.

The project, to me, pushes against top-down systems by foregrounding youth voices, rethinking thresholds, and designing spatial layers of intimacy and exposure. The reuse of existing halls avoids erasure. Instead, it celebrates what’s already there and transforms it slowly. It’s a project about healing, about giving agency through design. By emphasizing ethnographic research, community input, and the slow, incremental transformation of spaces, the project proposes a more participatory and thoughtful approach. This project encourages architects and urban designers to consider the lived experiences of individuals, especially marginalised groups, when designing spaces that aim to foster inclusivity, safety, and well-being.

Self-Reflection Through Key Questions

Two critical questions emerged during the research and design process that continue to shape my approach:

1. How can the design of public spaces enable marginalised youth to feel ownership and agency within a system that often surveils and excludes them?

The design of inclusive public space must move beyond accessibility and into the realm of ownership — social, emotional, and spatial. In this project, fostering youth agency meant working with them directly, embedding their voices in the design process, and resisting the dominant logics of surveillance through softer thresholds and spatial gestures. Design interventions like the pedestrianized Krugerstraat, parochial ground-floor spaces, and courtyards were not only physical modifications but also invitations to inhabit space differently. Instead of programming every surface, I allowed for appropriation, spontaneous football games using the facade, or socializing in semi-private thresholds, encouraging re-interpretation. These strategies counteracting the feeling of exclusion that stems from over-policed and over-designed spaces. Ultimately, youth ownership comes not from being given space, but from being trusted to shape it.

2. What is the role of spatial ambiguity and layered programming in fostering curiosity, safety, and risk in youth-oriented design?

Ambiguity in space — in function, scale, and access — became a deliberate design tool. It allowed youth to navigate, test, and personalize their environment. Rather than fixing space into rigid programs, I layered uses: a community kitchen that becomes a gathering space; a bathhouse that doubles as a cultural venue. This layering cultivates safety through choice and adaptability, while also allowing moments of playful risk — social, emotional, or creative. For youth, especially those navigating systemic exclusion, spatial ambiguity enables exploration without overexposure. These ambiguous, flexible spaces reject the logic of constant surveillance and instead offer an architecture of trust — where not everything is prescribed, and some things can emerge over time. This is where curiosity and belonging are built.

Future Work in the Field of Architecture

Looking ahead, the insights gained from this project will influence my future work as an architect. The process reinforced the importance of community engagement and ethnographic research in informing design decisions. In future projects, I will continue to explore the intersection of architecture and social equity, using research-driven approaches to create spaces that are not only functional but also promote a sense of belonging and community.

In future projects, I will continue to prioritize community engagement, and the adaptive reuse of existing structures. The experience of working in Hoboken and Kiel has shown me the power of design to shape social dynamics.

Value of the Project's Transferability

The lessons learned in this project can be applied to other urban contexts, particularly in areas facing similar issues of social exclusion and surveillance. The principles of inclusivity, adaptability, and community-driven design are universally applicable and can be used to inform urban development strategies in diverse settings. The focus on flexible, multifunctional spaces that cater to a range of user needs is a key aspect of the project's transferability. Moreover, the project highlights the importance of integrating cultural sensitivity into the design process, ensuring that spaces are meaningful and relevant to the communities they serve.