

Public Condenser, Copenhagen

COMMUNITY IN THE MAKING

Transforming a Vocational School Building in Bispebjerg into a Public Condenser



MSc 4 Architecture 2024/25

Public Building Graduation Studio

P4 Reflection, Hidde Bartstra, 4539923

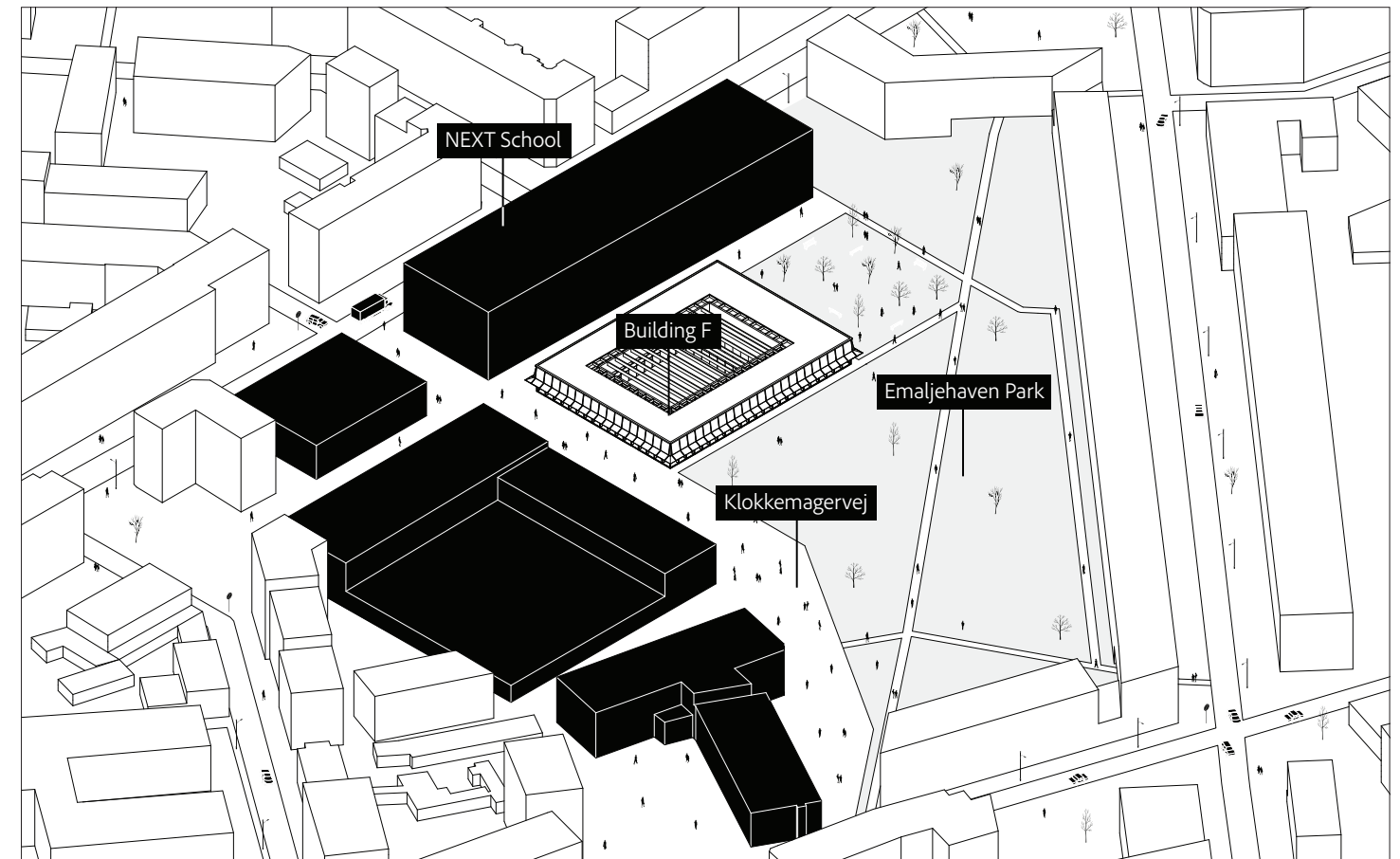
Project Summary

In Bispebjerg, Copenhagen, the NEXT vocational school sits at the heart of a district marked by strong traditions of craftsmanship, but also by socio-economic challenges and a lack of structured opportunities for its youth. As part of an ongoing urban renewal plan, efforts are being made to open up the school's closed campus to the surrounding community, a move that reflects a broader shift in how educational institutions are expected to engage with society.

Community in the Making responds to this moment of transformation by reimagining an existing, introverted campus building as a public condenser: a hybrid space where vocational knowledge is made accessible to the wider community. The building provides a platform for students and local craftspeople to host workshops, exhibitions, events, and informal learning activities centred around craft.

The project addresses the wider challenges of declining vocational enrolment and the evolving role of educational institutions, seeking to move beyond the traditional model of schools as isolated gatekeepers of knowledge, and envisions a future where learning is more accessible, communal, and integrated into urban life.

Architecturally, the design emphasizes flexibility, hybridity, and user agency, allowing the space to shift between school-related activities during school hours and community-facing programs after hours, on weekends, and during holidays. By building a community around craft, the project promotes vocational pathways, supports youth engagement, and contributes to the reconstruction of Bispebjerg's identity as a place of creativity and craft.



Isometric Site Diagram

Reflection on Process and Methods

The methodology for this project integrated various quantitative and qualitative approaches. Contextual analysis, including reports like the Nordvest Study by Aidin Soei, the Urban Renewal Plan for Bispebjerg, and the vision plan by ADEPT, provided insight into the current context and local needs, helping to align the project with broader development objectives. A literature review provided theoretical grounding around topics such as knowledge access and educational pathways. Quantitative case study research identified architectural precedents where public buildings bridge educational institutions and local communities. Site analysis examined local challenges and opportunities for the implementation of a public condenser in the allocated site area, and the relationship between NEXT and its immediate surroundings. Finally, research-by-design methods, such as conceptual models and programmatic experiments, explored ways to implement the public condenser strategy on the site.

The research grounded the project socially and theoretically, and design work revealed the nuances and complexities that general studies could not predict. The literature review, for example, looked into knowledge access and the changing role of educational institutions, which helped me think differently about the potential role of the school, not just as a site for formal educational but as a community platform. However, to go from general findings, such as the idea that “schools should be more accessible and community-oriented”, to specific spatial solutions was sometimes challenging. Design experiments, such as early massing studies, also revealed blind spots in the research, such as the difficulty of adapting an introverted concrete structure to support publicness. This required a more nuanced understanding of the various approaches to adaptive reuse, and my personal position for this project. This back and forth between research and design as explored by the studio showed how the interaction should be cyclical; you cannot do all the research first, and then design. This also applies to the development of the guiding theme for the project, as is explained in the following section. While the research findings defined the initial theme for the project, design explorations were crucial in refining it. Breakthroughs often came not from simply applying research findings, but from allowing the challenges encountered during design work to help me question and reflect more deeply on the research.

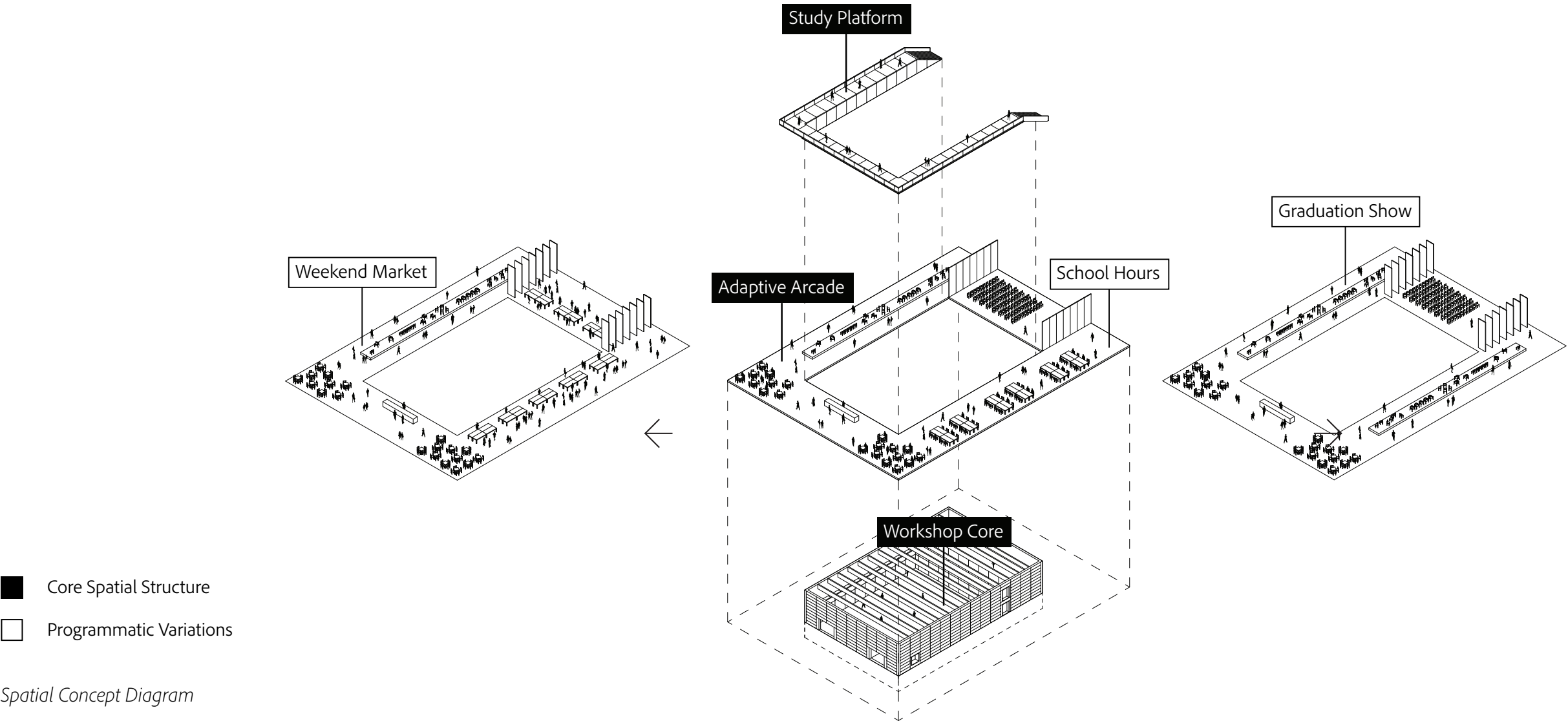
Throughout the project, I worked within Elise van Dooren’s conceptual framework as outlined in *Making Explicit in Design Education: Generic Elements in the Design Process*, which we explored during her MSc2 studio Van Gezel tot Meester. This framework significantly clarified my design process, particularly through the concept of establishing a clear ‘guiding theme’ to inform decision-making across the various domains of architecture, ensuring that the final design has a clear identity and internal coherence.

Regular reflection on the guiding theme helped me to repeatedly reassess the essence of my project. Often, moments of breakthrough were directly tied to rethinking or reframing this theme. For example, in the middle phase of the project, my guiding theme was defined as ‘craftsmanship’ or ‘putting craft on display.’ However, this proved too narrow, as it did not clearly inform design decisions across all architectural domains, and didn’t fully address the established aims for the building. During this phase, I struggled for an extended period with how to address the massing of the building, particularly in relation to the existing structure I aimed to reuse. The concrete structure had little architectural or aesthetic value, and its closed-off nature stood in direct opposition to the openness expected of a public building. I found it difficult to resolve how to transform this structure into something inviting, accessible, and in line with the guiding theme I had established. Looking back, I realize I spent too much time exploring an enormous number of massing variations, when the core issue was actually a lack of clarity in the guiding theme. While each iteration offered a plausible solution, I felt that none really unified the project into a coherent whole that adequately addressed the research outcomes or the themes outlined by the studio. Following the verbal and written feedback after the P2 presentation, it became clear that my project needed to more explicitly integrate the notion of community. At that point, I revised the guiding theme to ‘connecting community around craft’, which was a much better reflection of my research, and the specific phrasing opened up new possibilities regarding programming, circulation strategies, and the approach to the adaptive reuse of the existing structure. This reframing of the guiding theme was a crucial turning point in the development of the project, and allowed

me to integrate notions of craft, community, 'condensing', multiplicity, and hybridity into the project to a larger degree. In future projects, when I encounter a design challenge, I now recognize the importance of revisiting and questioning the guiding theme, rather than becoming lost in endless iterations without clear direction.

It may also be useful to reflect on my approach to the architectural design process in general. My goal was to try and boil the project down to its core, to identify a strong, specific, and contextually grounded guiding theme that responds meaningfully to the questions raised by the studio and the complexities of the site. From there, I aimed to express that theme as clearly and directly as possible through spatial and programmatic strategies.

My intent is to allow the central concept to be experienced with clarity. As noted during the P3 presentation, this approach can appear strict, but it does not stem from a desire to limit the possibilities, but rather a desire for each design decision to serve the guiding theme, rather than distract from it. My attempt is to strive for simplicity without losing the essence of the project. However, I recognize that this approach has potential limitations. In an attempt to focus on clarity and restraint, there is a risk of leaving little room for ambiguity or messiness, conditions that can sometimes lead to unexpected and meaningful results. This is likely an area in which I will have to mature as a designer in the coming years.



Relation to Studio

The graduation project closely aligns with the studio theme of “public condenser,” a building typology that, in my view, is primarily designed to serve two roles. First, it facilitates interaction between groups of people that might otherwise not engage, creating opportunities for social exchange. Second, it brings together a diverse range of programs and activities under one roof, encouraging overlap and interaction. At its core, the project responds to this ambition by reimagining a disconnected and introverted school campus building as an open, hybrid environment where educational and community activities intersect. Rather than creating a single-function public facility, the project seeks to condense a wide range of users, programs, and time-based activities into one adaptable structure.

The principles of hybridity and multiplicity are central to the spatial organization, enabling the building to shift between school-related and community-facing programs throughout the day, week, and year. In this way, the project encourages new forms of overlap and interaction, while promoting a more sustainable model of urban development by adapting an existing structure for multiple uses, extending its lifespan and relevance within the community.

Academic, Professional, and Societal Relevance

The project attempts to reimagine the role of formal educational institutions in relation to their local communities, highlighting the potential for isolated, self-contained buildings to adapt to the developing educational landscape.

By transforming the NEXT campus building into a public-facing space, the project addresses social equity, offering the community greater access to educational and cultural resources. It fosters community engagement, making vocational education more approachable and integrated into daily life, thereby strengthening Bispebjerg’s identity as a hub of craftsmanship. Professionally, the project showcases the potential of adaptive reuse in educational architecture, providing a

model for how such spaces can evolve to meet contemporary societal needs. It may serve as a case study in designing hybrid spaces that cater to both educational and public functions. Scientifically, the project engages with modern educational theories such as those put forth by Hugo Labate and Richard Sennett emphasizing equitable access, lifelong learning, as well as community involvement.

Transferability of Results

The proposed model of a school building as a public condenser could potentially be applied to other neighborhoods or educational institutions, particularly in contexts where schools are similarly physically or socially disconnected from their surroundings. However, several conditions would need to be in place for this model to succeed elsewhere.

This project draws heavily on the strong craft traditions shared between the school and the local community, which may be an aspect of the project that is not directly transferable. In other contexts, however, similar overlaps may be found around different forms of local identity, expertise, or shared values. A local identity or skill base helps to give the public condenser meaning, without which the activities hosted may feel imposed or out of place. Also, a community that is willing to engage is important. In this project, the existing student body, who will soon live on campus, provides a natural base of users who can be activated to organise workshops, exhibitions, and events. Municipal support, such as the ongoing urban renewal plan in Bispebjerg, also helps to embed the project within broader development strategies and ensures that it aligns with long-term community goals. Architecturally, the success of a public condenser model depends on designing flexible spaces that can accommodate a wide range of users, programs, and times of use, while maintaining a clear overall identity.