Final reflection

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1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (Ar, Ur, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

My graduation project explores how architectural design can foster social interaction to reduce feelings of loneliness, by creating a building where social functions and housing come together, and where spatial conditions are designed to encourage informal encounters in dense urban neighbourhoods. In my research I address the problem of social isolation and loneliness in our contemporary cities, and how the built environment can have a positive influence on this. The topic engages all disciplines of the master's program (Architecture, Urbanism, and Building Sciences); the project has a strong connection at the urban scale, as well as at the building level, and emphasizes the importance of certain technical solutions. Because the graduation project delves deeply into how the spatial conditions of a building can influence social relations, this graduation project specifically aligns with the master track Architecture. In the broader context of today, the project contributes to designing healthier and more inclusive architecture in an urban context, and thereby also to the debate on how we can design better meeting places through architectural means and also stimulate contact between residents.

2. How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

In my research, many different architectural and pragmatic aspects are explored that can influence social interactions within a space. Since these aspects can naturally be designed in countless ways, a clear focus is necessary. By looking at the specific context of the Tarwewijk, the research already suggests which meeting places are suitable in the context of the Tarwewijk, and which target group(s) require more attention. This results in the design of a multifunctional building in order to meet all of these different needs; a library that offers many different functions, combined with housing designed to facilitate encounters between residents. The research also suggests that transition zones play a major role in facilitating encounters between people. This is relevant across multiple scales and is reflected in the design. These transition zones (referred to as "niches" in my design) are located at residents' front doors and are strongly oriented toward the view. As such, they become attractive and meaningful places for residents to claim as their own, from where they can more easily make contact with others. Transition zones also play a role in the design of the library, though they manifest differently. First of all, as also argued in the research, a certain degree of accessibility

must be guaranteed. This can be done by making the building visible (in my design the building volume has a landmark towards the park and an atrium that lights up in the evening towards the other side) but perhaps the most important thing is that the building is part of a route, by cutting the buildings in two a shortcut is created that is attractive for people walking by to use, so that they come into contact with the building in an accessible way. To further soften this route and the transition between private (inside) and public (outside), the adjacent park is drawn into this route, so that the human scale is restored in this relatively wide route (15-20 meters). The park appears from the research to be an important meeting place for the Tarwewijk because it appeals to all target groups and therefore guarantees a sense of inclusivity. My research inspired me to bring the park inward, resulting in a new type of place: a garden around which the building is situated. This garden functions both as an outdoor space for lingering and a pathway to walk through. In doing so, it achieves two goals at once: increasing accessibility and visibility and the possibility to use the space as a meeting place. From there, the surrounding library invites people in simply by opening its doors and offering a welcoming presence. In this project, accessibility becomes the essential requirement for enhancing social interaction.
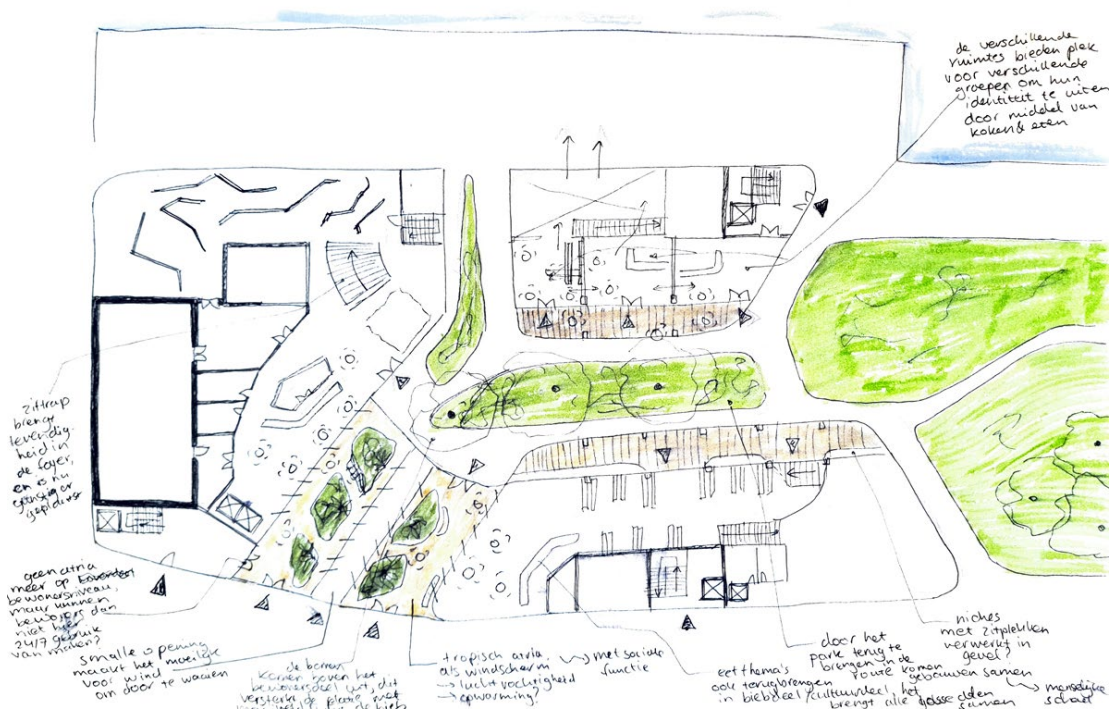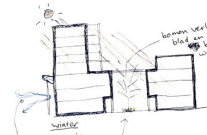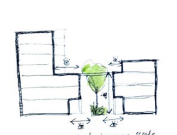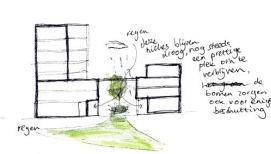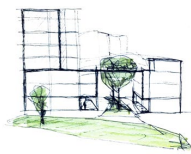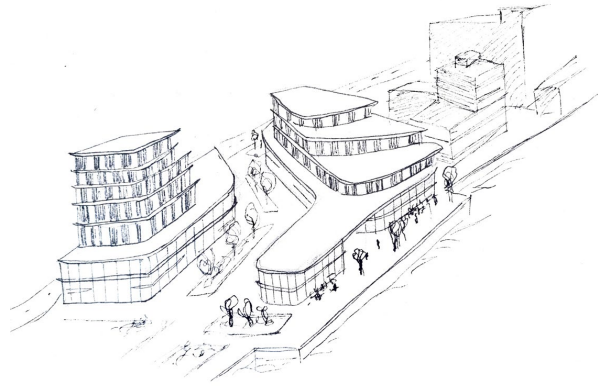
3. How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

How the research helped my design

Through the combination of literature research and fieldwork in Tarwewijk itself (coming into contact with people on the street, at a neighborhood initiative but also by delving into the social infrastructure) I was able to gain a lot of inspiration and use arguments to justify my design choices. My literature research has revealed many general design choices that can work well in different contexts (such as the transition zone between the front door and the street). I can therefore apply that knowledge both in this design and in other future designs, since designing from a social perspective can play a valuable role in every architectural design, regardless of the context.

At the same time, the steps I took during the fieldwork were at least as informative, since It allowed me to learn in different ways how to get in touch with future users (through site visits of case studies, engaging with community initiatives and their users, speaking with people on the street, and researching a neighbourhood's social infrastructuree). This allowed me to base the design choices in this project more on the specific context than I have been able to do in my previous design projects.

The approach in the design itself

In my design process I also have my own approach. I mainly try to get inspiration from the surrounding context to make my design choices. For example, the shape of the building was created by looking at sight lines, how the view can be optimally used, how the sun is positioned and what the function of the plot can mean in a broader urban context (it can function as part of a route). Other given conditions from the environment also led to conscious
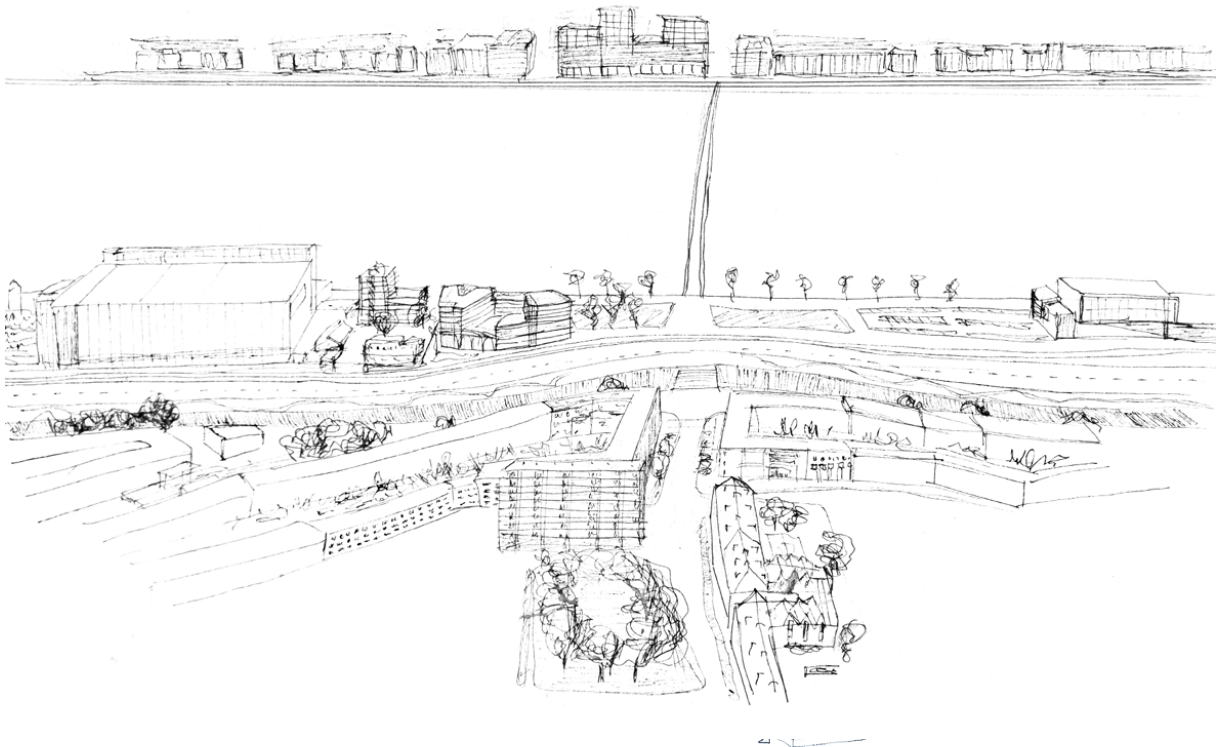
design choices, a factor such as wind for example. Since wind has a major influence on the microclimate, and because Rotterdam (being close to the sea and the Maas) is known for both failed and successful designs in this area, I seriously explored how to address this in my design. I considered using the landscape to create a wind buffer and designing an atrium on the dominant wind axis, allowing it to fulfill both a climate-related and a social function. Another environmental factor I considered was water. The project is located in an outer-dike area, which comes with an increased flood risk. This made me feel responsible for thinking about how to achieve some kind of flood resilience in my design, by for example, raising the surrounding ground level or placing the building on concrete columns (this can immediately solve the parking problem of approximately 70 parking spaces). However, through extensive sketching and the development of more detailed drawings, I discovered during the design process that this introduces other problems, such as a significant reduce of accessibility, financial limitations and, and the risk of making the ground level unattractive if the building were raised, as it would become one large parking area to meet parking requirements. As a result, major changes were also necessary in the design process to get to a logical design, but along the way I did reflect deeply on how to approach complex challenges, both in terms of what works and what doesn't.

4. How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

This design is highly relevant in today's context, as loneliness is a growing societal issue that has a serious impact on people's health and well-being. This research therefore provides valuable insights into how a discipline such as architecture can contribute to this problem, by exploring how spatial conditions can influence social relations and thus create space to facilitate the process of encounters between people. Several aspects of the design are based on the insights that emerge from the research, yet are combined with design choices that are inspired by the specific context of the location of the design.

My design and research also place strong emphasis on integrating ethical considerations by delving into the social challenges present in inner-city neighbourhoods such as the Tarwewijk. In doing so, the project highlights the value of socially inclusive and accessible functions, and the importance of creating spaces where people can express their identity.

5. How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

Designing transition zones

The main subject of my project is the design of transition zones in which social interaction can arise naturally. These spaces are located between the public domain (outside the building) and the private domain (interior of the building), and therefore form an accessible, informal meeting environment. Designing these types of spaces can be applied in various building typologies. Because these zones are fairly flexible in scale and form (as in my design: an atrium,
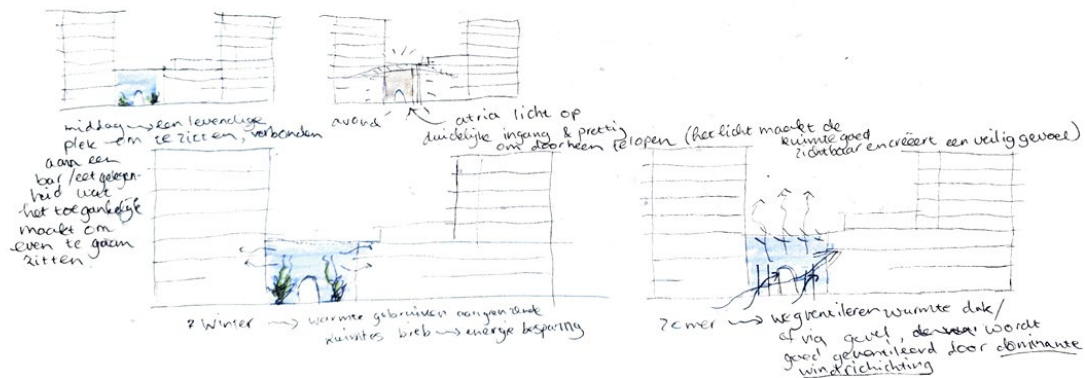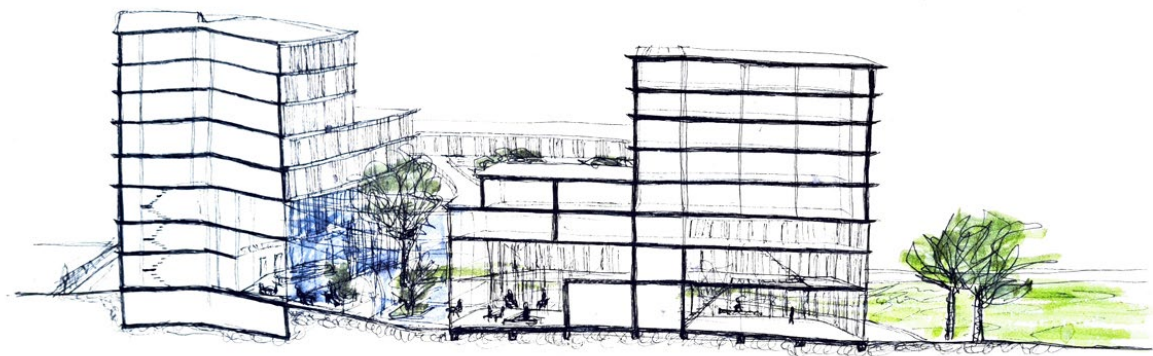
relationship between landscape and building, shared courtyards on the higher residential level, niches or terraces in front of the front door of a home), they can be applied in various (residential) environments as a structural part of social infrastructure — especially in densely built-up urban areas where formal meeting places are limited. These transition zones facilitate spontaneous encounters between residents and visitors, which in a wide range of contexts contributes to a greater sense of connection and belonging.
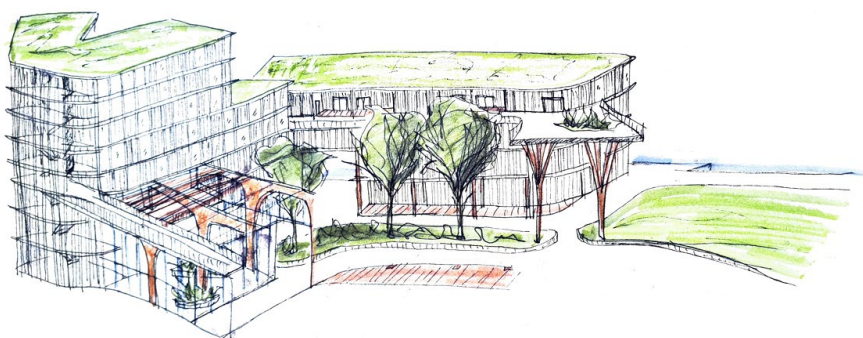
Mixing functions

A key element of my design is the combination of functions. The design principle of mixing functions in one accessible location (such as the library with cultural, cooking, meeting and learning functions) is transferable to other neighbourhoods that, like the Tarwewijk, have a fragmented or insufficient social network. This principle can be applied in comparable urban contexts where social segregation and limited resources hinder the formation of social networks. The starting point is that combining functions can lower the threshold for

participation and enable appropriation by various groups in a location where they can also meet each other (which could result in diminishing differences between different social groups according to literature by Richard Sennett)

Use of the right spatial proportions and degree of screening (sight lines and human scale)

The research by Ulden et al. (2015) shows that creating transition zones with a depth of approximately 1-2 meters is the most suitable for creating encounters between people. Given the research, spatial tactics that I also applied in my design appear to be universally effective for stimulating spontaneous social contact, regardless of the socio-economic status of a neighbourhood.

In addition, drawing the park into the route is also a way to create a more intimate space, which brings back the human scale in the route through the building that was previously actually at the threshold of 20 meters wide (according to the research by Ulden et al. (2015), there is less planned contact in a street from 20 meters).

In addition, many openings and meeting places in/on/around the building are positioned on sight lines in the area, because sight lines can serve as an initial point of contact. This way of designing can also contribute to facilitating contact.

- **Looking back at the design process: how could I have approached the process more efficiently and logically?**

Throughout the design process, I didn't always manage my time in the most effective way: Since my research touched on so many different aspects, I found it difficult to prioritize which themes to focus on during the design phase. Additionally, I struggled with the relatively complex form of the building, which made it difficult to design a logical and efficient circulation system. Because I wasn't sure how to tackle these issues, I ended up spending too much time on secondary aspects, such as the integration of the landscape with the building or how to solve the parking situation. Ironically, I eventually reverted back to ideas I had already proposed during my P2 presentation. In hindsight, these were not central themes in my design; the main focus should have been on designing transitional zones and ensuring accessibility and inclusivity to stimulate social encounters within the building. I now realize I should have looked much more closely at the beginning of the design process in which ways I could bring this forward in my architecture. Although things eventually started to come together, it's unfortunate that this clarity came so late, because I could have refined the final outcome even more carefully if I figured this out earlier.

Another thing I underestimated was the importance of clearly formulating my reasoning alongside my design decisions from the beginning. I tend to sketch a lot and make decisions based on intuition, which later made it difficult to link those choices to strong arguments. Looking back, I wish I had started working on this earlier in the design process, it would have made it a lot easier and also might have reduced the chaos in my thinking, which would have made the process smoother. Going forward, developing a strong line of reasoning alongside the design process is something I will also take with me in my next design assignments.

- **What more could I have researched more during the design phase?**

During my feedback sessions, I was often told that I was trying to do 'too much' in my design. There was certainly some truth to that. As mentioned above, I struggled to prioritize the various design guidelines, and also to apply them in a way that small interventions could have a big impact on the overall design.

In the end, I did eliminate many ideas that were too complicated and not effective enough, replacing them with simpler yet stronger solutions to still achieve my aims. However, this came at the expense of some elements I would have liked to develop and explore further, particularly the design of interior spaces.
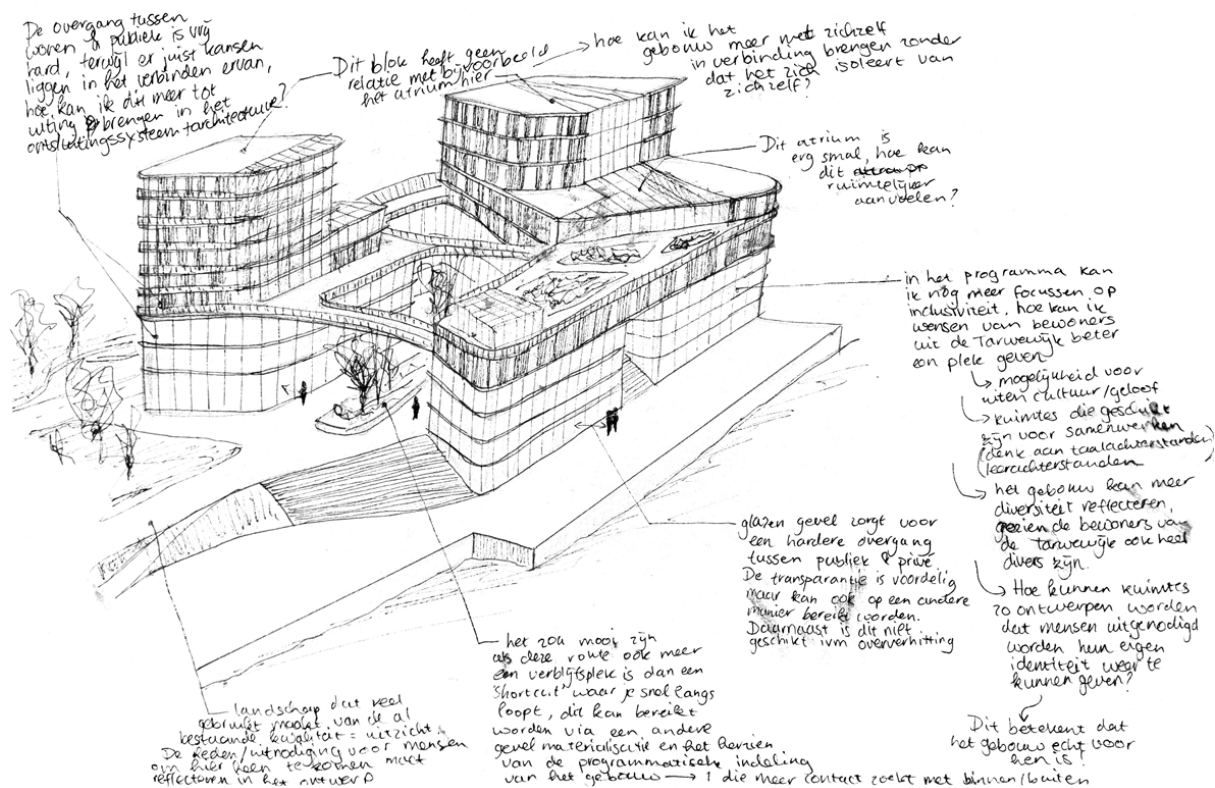
I would have liked to take more steps toward exploring how these interior spaces could be more clearly connected to my central theme, especially concerning the interior design of the library. I also believe there was more potential to delve into the development of the masterplan and the social function of the adjacent park. But at a certain point, I had to make the conscious decision to set these aspects aside in order to give the building itself the attention it required.