

Reshaping Boundaries

Copenhagen - Amager - Sundholm

Reflection

Introduction

The History and Transformation of Sundholm

Sundholm's history begins in 1908, when it was established as a forced labor institution aimed at isolating marginalized groups and subjecting them to rehabilitative labor within walled confines. Over the 20th century, shifting social attitudes led to its gradual transformation. Physical barriers were dismantled, and the institution evolved into housing for vulnerable populations—marking a transition from a closed disciplinary facility to an open, yet complex, urban neighborhood. By the late 20th century, Copenhagen's urban expansion brought numerous social housing developments to the Sundholm area. Concurrently, job opportunities generated by industrial growth attracted large numbers of immigrants and low-income residents. While this alleviated housing shortages, uneven resource distribution eventually contributed to social tensions and a sense of insecurity in the area. In response, the City of Copenhagen launched an urban renewal strategy in 2007, aiming to improve living conditions and attract middle-class residents through increased social mixing. Beginning in 2008, a series of public space improvement projects were introduced to enhance Sundholm's urban image. However, despite these efforts, social tensions and spatial conflicts persisted.

Current Functions and Spatial Composition

Sundholm is a functionally diverse neighborhood, encompassing:

- Six residential buildings housing working-class and some middle-income families;
- A repurposed industrial laundry now serving as an art factory with studios for local creatives;
- A youth correctional facility for underage offenders;
- A Night Café providing temporary shelter for the homeless;
- Several social welfare housing units for unhoused individuals, those with addiction issues, and residents experiencing mental health challenges.

This hybrid spatial configuration makes Sundholm a microcosm of Copenhagen's broader social contradictions—reflecting both the inclusive ambitions of the welfare state and the complexities of managing urban peripheries.

Key Challenges

- **Spatial Exclusion and Social Fragmentation**
Although Sundholm's physical walls have been removed, psychological barriers remain. Many neighboring residents avoid entering the area, associating it with danger—particularly due to the youth detention center and concentration of social housing, which reinforce negative stereotypes. As a result, interaction between groups is limited, and mutual distrust prevails. While residents express a desire for more public gathering places, existing plazas and green spaces remain underutilized due to concerns over safety.
- **An Urban Fracture Zone**
Strategically located between Amager's city center, a bustling commercial and transit hub, and the nearby university district and nature park, Sundholm has the potential to serve as a vital urban connector. However, its current configuration—characterized by fenced institutions and unfriendly pedestrian zones—has instead created an "urban trench," impeding natural movement and isolating the area from its surroundings.
- **Limitations of Urban Renewal Efforts**
Despite various upgrades since 2008, true social integration remains elusive. Initiatives like the art factory have had limited reach, and perceptions of the area remain polarized: middle-class residents often view Sundholm as a no-go zone, while marginalized groups feel policed and unwelcome. This mutual alienation continues to hinder grassroots community-building efforts.

Opportunities for Regeneration

- **Activating Underused Spaces:** Vacant lots near the art factory and neglected green areas between housing blocks could be reimagined as lively, inclusive public spaces, fostering interaction and community engagement.
- **Leveraging Cultural Diversity:** The coexistence of diverse social groups offers untapped potential for cultural exchange and collaboration, paving the way for shared events, workshops, and neighborhood initiatives that could bridge social divides.
- **Catalyst:** Expand the role of the art factory into a catalyst for community-based placemaking.

Project Objective

The goal of this project is to design a public building in Sundholm that heals fractured social relations and disjointed urban spaces, fostering an inclusive and vibrant public realm.

Defining the Public Condenser in Sundholm

Through mapping, interviews, and statistical analysis, I identified that Sundholm's spatial configuration is dominated by numerous boundaries—including wire fences, hedges, walls, and other obstructive elements. These features sever connections between public spaces, leaving pocket parks and community gardens abandoned due to lack of maintenance and accessibility. In addition to these physical boundaries, psychological boundaries are equally present—particularly between vulnerable populations living in Sundholm (such as residents of social housing, the unhoused, or individuals facing mental health challenges) and the surrounding neighborhood. Thus, boundary emerges as the central concept in understanding Sundholm's spatial and social dynamics. The core question becomes:

How to reshape boundaries in order to create a Public Condenser?

Rethinking Boundaries: From Disconnection to Belonging

The foundation of this project lies in recognizing that boundaries are not solely mechanisms of separation, but also potential spaces of communication and belonging. A boundary is no longer seen as a wall, but rather as a transitional space—something tangible, perceptible, and capable of enabling spatial and experiential shifts between inside and outside, private and public, "us" and "them."



Design Strategy

1. Selecting Key Architectural Anchors

Five existing buildings with strong spatial and social potential were selected as intervention sites:

- The Art Factory (a cultural anchor)
- Two social housing buildings (home to marginalized residents)
- The Night Café (a shelter and gathering space for the unhoused)
- An Unemployment Assistance Center (a public service institution)

These structures serve as physical platforms for spatial and social transformation.

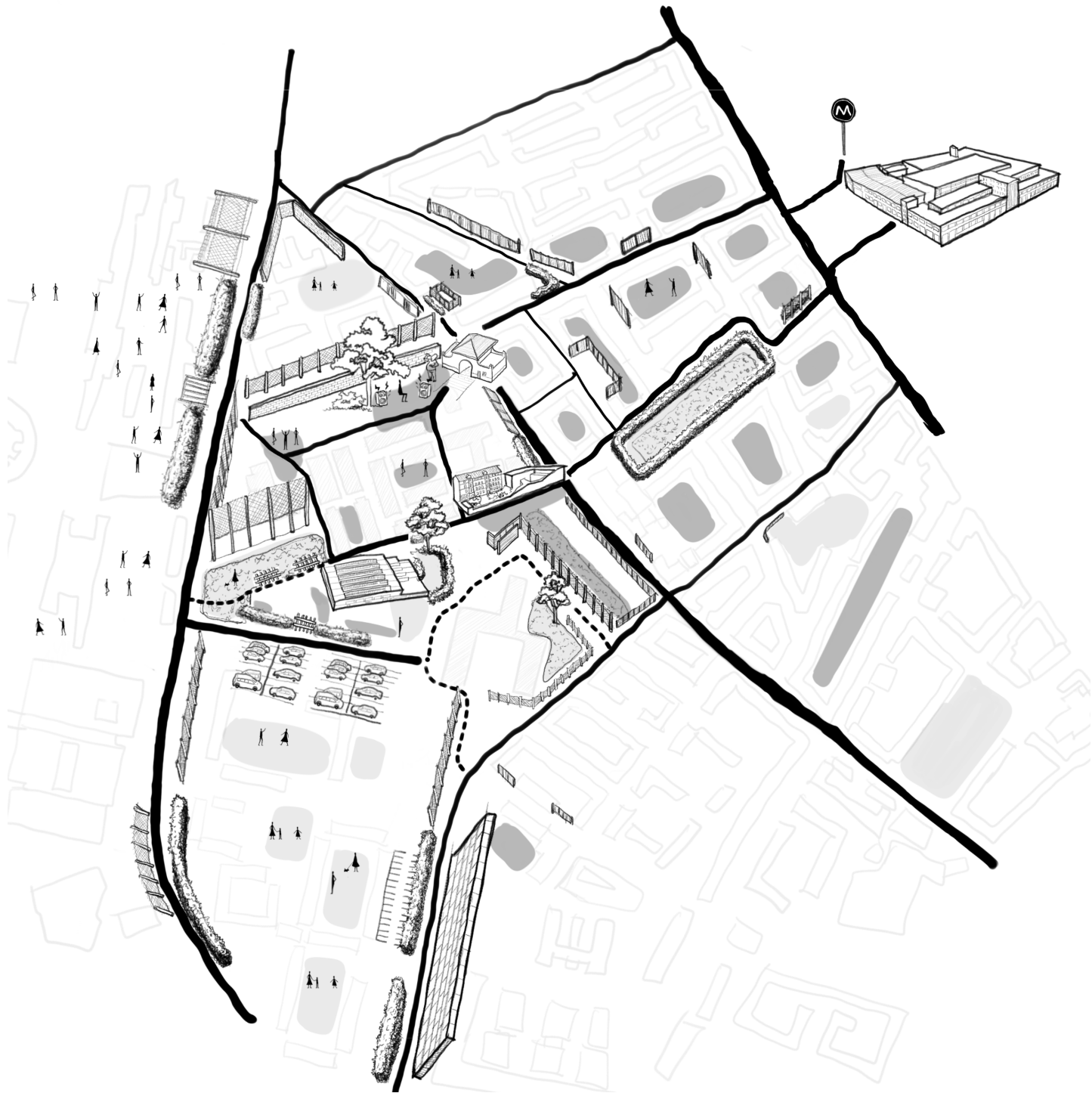
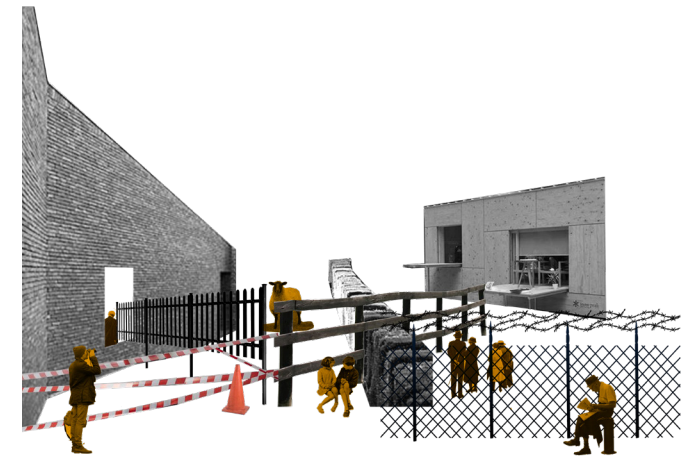
2. Programmatic Weaving & Parallel Narratives

Each building is reprogrammed with tailored uses based on site conditions and local needs. The design connects these programs to establish parallel, dual narratives that cater to different social groups. These narratives emphasize interaction across difference—enabling both structured and spontaneous encounters between diverse users. The "boundary space" between programs becomes the key site of activation—an interface where these interactions unfold. It is within these overlapping thresholds that the Public Condenser takes shape.

3. House-in-House: Spatial Nesting and Material Expression

Each intervention applies the concept of "house-in-house"—embedding intimate, supportive spaces within more open, communal ones. This nested spatial hierarchy allows for a gradual transition between privacy and public engagement. In parallel, material articulation is used to intensify the experience of spatial thresholds. For example, warm wood may signify welcoming, human-scale spaces, while rough concrete might mark institutional or transitional zones. Through this tactile language, users are guided through sequences of exposure → interaction → retreat, enhancing both spatial legibility and emotional safety.

By redefining and activating boundaries, this project aims to transform Sundholm from a space of division into one of exchange and coexistence. The Public Condenser becomes both a physical and social mechanism—reconnecting fragmented places and catalyzing new patterns of interaction and belonging.



Relation Between Graduation Project and Studio Topic: Multiplicity, Hybridity, Resilience, Sustainability, Healthiness

Multiplicity

This project addresses the coexistence and needs of multiple social groups: vulnerable populations, local residents, artists, and the broader public. Within this public building complex, there are dedicated programs for vulnerable groups (e.g., employment support, temporary shelters), community-oriented facilities (e.g., shared living rooms, libraries, fitness areas), and workspaces for creatives. Beyond these designated functions, “boundary spaces”—undefined and flexible zones—are introduced to accommodate diverse uses. These zones serve as mediators, encouraging spontaneous and structured interaction across social divides.

Hybridity

The project embodies hybridity on two levels:

- Programmatic Hybridity: The architectural programming fosters meaningful relationships among different user groups rather than reinforcing hostility or segregation. Local residents and artists contribute to supporting vulnerable populations, who in turn express themselves and reconnect with society through work, creation, and shared space.
- Spatial Hybridity: The “house-in-house” design strategy nests different spatial types within one another, creating a layered environment where public, semi-public, and private zones overlap. Diverse material expressions—contrasting textures and finishes—make spatial boundaries perceptible while maintaining overall unity and integration.

Resilience

The project’s resilience lies in the interdependence and adaptability of its programmatic components. The interactions between spaces generate “boundary zones” —dynamic, undefined environments that evolve with user behavior. These spaces are not fixed in function but represent ongoing experimentation, allowing for flexible use over time and in response to changing needs.

Sustainability

Sustainability is approached from both social and spatial perspectives:

- Socially, the project challenges conventional notions of boundaries as rigid and exclusionary. Instead, they are redefined as protective, connective, and inclusive interfaces.

- Architecturally, the design prioritizes low-tech, reusable materials and rich spatial experiences that extend the building’s lifecycle and usability.
- Green elements are also employed as a type of soft boundary, enhancing environmental quality and spatial integration.
- Passive design strategies are used to reduce energy consumption, promoting long-term ecological sustainability.

Healthiness

The public building is conceived as a community health hub, addressing the physical and mental well-being of all residents. Through a wide range of programs and inclusive design, it fosters personal development, emotional security, and a collective sense of identity and belonging, reinforcing both individual wellness and communal cohesion.

Relation Between the Graduation Project and the Master Track and Program

This graduation project is situated within the Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences (MSc AUBS) program and specifically aligns with the Architecture track. It builds on the thematic focus of the studio—exploring inclusive public spaces—by emphasizing a research-by-design approach to develop a critical framework for the design of public architecture. The project serves as both a culmination of and a reflection on the broader themes, tools, and methodologies encountered throughout the master’s program, integrating design, theory, and critical spatial thinking. By focusing on the public realm, the work connects architectural design with urban dynamics, social inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity.

Assessment of Working Methodology

Rather than adopting a linear design process, this project embraces a cyclical and iterative methodology, where ongoing reflection plays a central role in shaping the outcome. This approach allowed me to engage deeply with complex spatial and societal issues, continuously refining my understanding and response through analysis, design, and feedback loops. I employed multi-scalar thinking, breaking down abstract concepts to uncover relationships between form, use, and context. This mode of working proved effective in navigating the layered nature of public

space, especially when dealing with diverse user groups and shifting socio-cultural dynamics.

Academy and social values

Academically, this project contributes to discourse on inclusive and adaptive architecture, proposing an alternative reading of boundaries—not as dividers, but as interfaces for connection and interaction. The concept of the “public condenser” advances thinking on mixed-use public buildings by offering a spatial framework that encourages social overlap and coexistence.

Societally, the project addresses critical issues such as social exclusion, fragmentation, and isolation. By reimagining a divided neighborhood as an open and supportive community hub, the design seeks to foster trust, inclusion, and resilience. Ethical considerations guided key design decisions: the project prioritizes vulnerable groups, enables participatory engagement, and uses flexible, low-tech materials to ensure long-term adaptability. It ultimately aims to enhance well-being, equity, and a sense of belonging through the built environment.

