

# Reflection Paper

A methodology for designing user  
experienced-based public spaces

AR3AH105, Vacant Heritage  
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Figure 1.1 Photo Gedempte Oude Gracht, 1976 (NHA)

## Introduction

The vacant department store V&D in the centre of Haarlem, built in 1934 and listed as national heritage, was taken as a case study for this research. This research aims at developing a methodology for designing user experience-based public spaces as a process to reactivate vacant heritage. The methodology includes historical analysis, urban analysis, and field observations of the 12 quality criteria for public urban spaces defined by Jan Gehl (2010). The results provide guidelines for integrating user experience in the redesign of public spaces, preparing cities for a sustainable future while conserving its valuable heritage.

Recommendations have been written for the case study, which have influenced the redesign of V&D Haarlem. The redesign will be a mixed use building with the ground floor and rooftop as public space. There will be functions such as food market, shop-in-shop, education, cooking studio, interactive museum and restaurant. These are fitted with flexible timber modules. In the core of the building there will be a void with a ramp where a green oasis of tropical plants is the centrepiece. In this reflection, I want to elaborate and reflect on how the 12 quality criteria of Gehl forms the research and redesign process.

## Relationship Between Graduation Project with Studio Topic, Master Track, and Master Programme

In December 2015, the V&D was officially declared bankrupt. As a result, there was a huge vacancy of almost 350,000 square meters of retail space in the Netherlands. The department stores were located in prominent locations in the heart of nearly 60 historic cities. Most buildings are classified as national monuments because of their cultural-historical value for the city. The Vacant Heritage studio focuses on the reuse and adaptation of the former V&D department stores of various locations. This is in line with the fundamental goal of the MSc track Architecture by focusing on the 'rich architectural culture of the Netherlands'.

As a native of Haarlem, I can still remember the memories as a child. Because of the personal connection with the building, I chose the redesign of V&D Haarlem for my graduation project. This research aims to develop a methodology for designing user experience-based public spaces as a process to reactivate vacant heritage. The results provide guidelines for integrating user experience in the redesign of public spaces, preparing cities for a sustainable future while preserving its valuable heritage.

This has expanded my definition of sustainability to include cultural, social, environmental and economic aspects. During the previous MSc 1 Heritage studio, the focus of sustainability was mainly on making the building energy efficient with respect for the identified heritage values, which only shows the cultural, ecological and economic side of sustainability. However, this graduation project has made it possible to discover the social side of sustainability. The focus on the entire term sustainability is in line with the MSc program who see design practice as a way to 'explore innovative ways to create more sustainable development'.

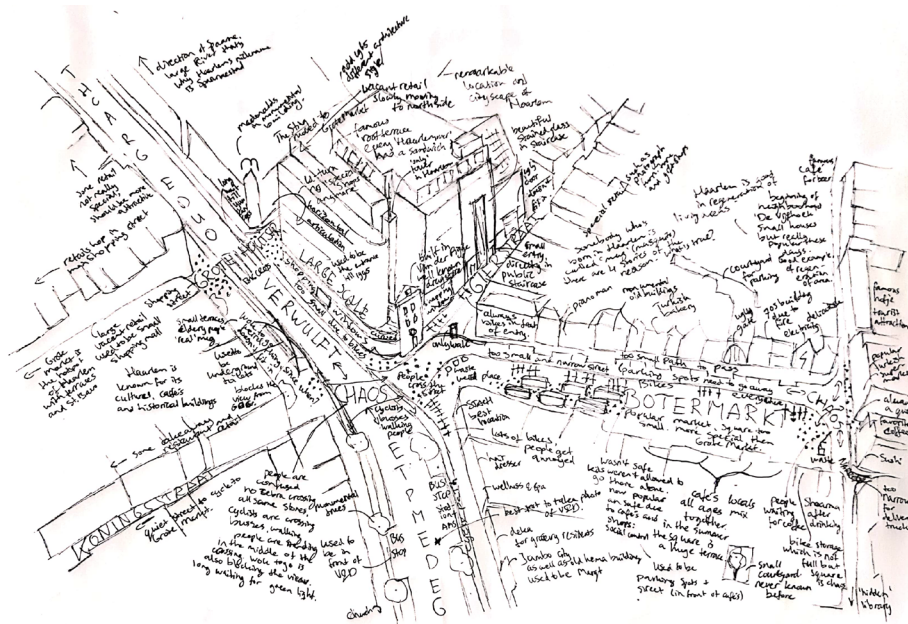


Figure 1.2 Soft Atlas V&D Haarlem, 2021

## Relation Research and Design

This research has a personal fascination as starting point. Last year, I wrote an essay about Casa da Música and the surrounding public space in Porto. The purpose was to create a public space where people could meet, making it an addition to the social life in the city. The proof that it has succeeded can now be seen through the gatherings of different groups at the public space in front of the building, such as the skateboarders, teenagers, businessmen, international tourists and concert visitors. The public space is mentioned as "... characterized by a minimum of program and a maximum of action" (Tejada, 2018).

It ensures that people come together and that it improves the quality of life in the city (Karlson, 2012). This source of inspiration shows that it is not only important to examine the design, but especially the use of public space to achieve the best result. The two research topics of public space and user experience emerged from this personal fascination. After choosing the location V&D Haarlem, the next step was to make a soft atlas mind map drawing to create an overview of everything you think, see, and feel at the location (Rothuizen, 2010). Because of the personal connection as a native of Haarlem, a lot of previously acquired knowledge and user experience could be seen in this drawing.

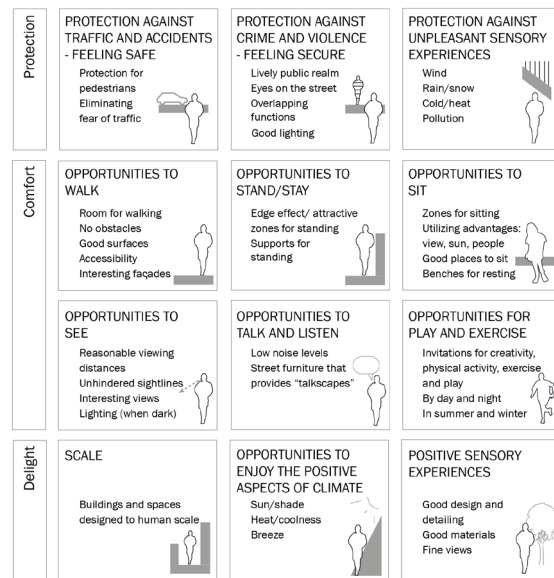


Figure 1.3 12 quality criteria (Gehl, p. 239), 2010

The imposing building is enhanced by its location. The main routes from public transport to walking routes come together at the most important junction of the centre of Haarlem. Nowadays, this important junction is dominated by traffic, which results in words like chaos and too narrow to pass each other. This prompted the research to look for methods to improve urban quality. The 12 quality criteria of Jan Gehl concerning the pedestrian landscape were used as theoretical framework (Gehl, 2010). This toolbox is the most important bridge between research and design. It shows which elements the public space should be tested and the project books of Gehl Architects show which analysis and observations are needed.

By conducting fieldwork in the form of observations, it became clear which quality criteria are missing at Verwulft. Five challenges have been formulated, which are feeling safe, protection against unpleasant sensory experiences, opportunities to sit, opportunities to play/exercise and positive sensory experiences. Recommendations have been made by comparing user experience-based solutions. By applying these recommendations in the design, the influence of the research on the design is clearly visible. The recommendations applied in the design are reduce vehicular traffic and add the green lane, transform the plinth from visual to physical permeability, place traditional benches along the walking route, add temporary art and play invitations and create green oasis.





Figure 1.4 Current context, 2021 (Google)



Figure 1.5 New context, 2021



## Research Methodology

The graduation studio had a specific structure where the research preceded the design process. There was a proposed methodology that started with factsheets on heritage value, damage and sustainability. The three themes per building were examined, which was followed by individual research.

For my individual research, I was looking for a design approach which incorporates the user experience in the design process. The Vision in Product Design approach is originally a product design approach, which consists of the deconstruction and design phase resulting in a vision for the future (Hekkert & van Dijk, 2014). Both phases go through the levels of product, the interaction between human and product, and the context. As a result, it is a user-centred design where people value the designed product. The product design approach diagram has been adapted to be used as part of a methodology.

The first phase of the diagram is the elaborated value assessment, where the tangible and intangible values and attributes are identified. This was preceded by an (interpretative) historical research, which included analysis of historical photos, archival drawings and an interview with Benno Vroom (4th generation of Vroom family).

The value assessment resulted in the drawings of limits of acceptable change, showing which elements should be preserved, redeveloped, maintained, or interfere with the building. This was an important step for the design process and understanding of the heritage values. Subsequently, the first sub question presents the interaction level to understand the user experience through social media research. The second sub question is about the missing quality criteria (Gehl, 2010) by means of field observations. The sustainability factsheet has contributed by the previously made site analysis, but also by concluding which site analysis still had to be made in order to create a complete overview. The third sub question is about the quality criteria which can be added in the future. Finally, the user recommendations are the suitable functions according to the users obtained from a previously completed questionnaire by students (Flach, 2021).

While writing the research paper, I came to the conclusion that the Vision in Product Design was less applicable. The research is mainly focused on the field observations of the missing and to be added quality criteria. However, it helped a lot in the beginning to bring structure to the research and integrate the factsheets.

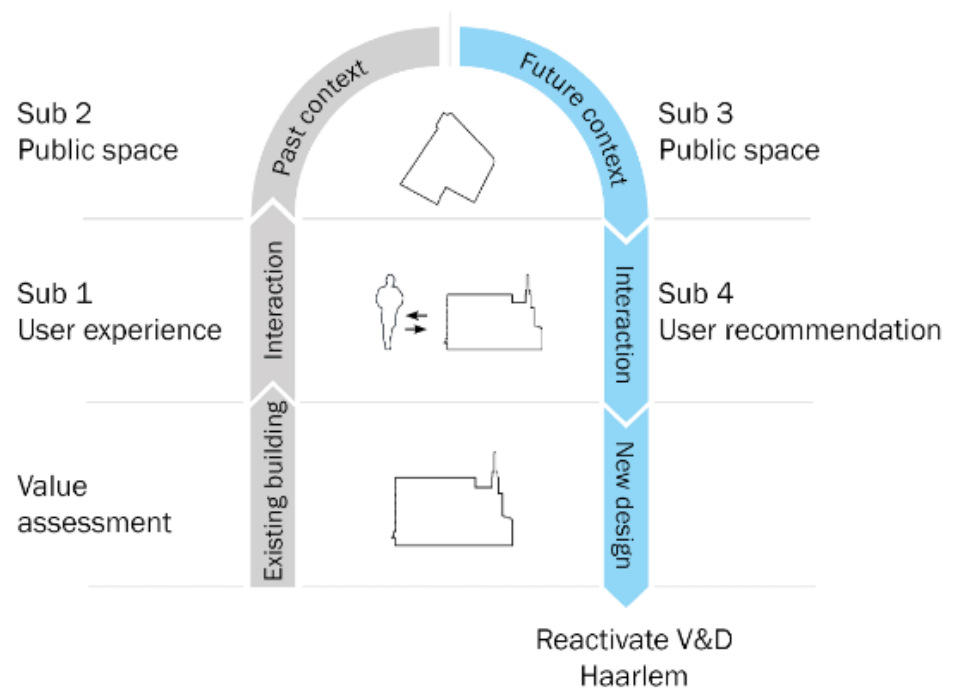


Figure 1.6 Adapted VIP approach diagram, 2021

## Relation Between the Graduation Project to Wider Context

The research topic public space is one of the priorities on Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations (2015), in the target 11.7, on universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible green and public spaces. Urban public spaces provide opportunities for people to meet and interact with the community, contribute to the connection between human and nature and have multiple benefits to human and environmental health. With a rising global population and the largest human migration in history, more than half of the world's population currently lives in urban areas.

According to the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, this rapid and uncontrolled urbanization can often lead to the loss of public space. To adapt historic cities towards a sustainable future, it is necessary to focus on the total experience of its users, including the routing and accessible and attractive public spaces. This is in line with the aim of this research, which is developing a methodology for designing user experience-based public spaces as a process to reactivate vacant heritage. The results provide guidelines for integrating user experience in the redesign of public spaces, preparing cities for a sustainable future while conserving its valuable heritage.

In the book *Cities for people*, a short explanation is given in the toolbox about the 12 quality criteria concerning the pedestrian landscape, in which it is explained that the last criteria works like an umbrella, and that urban quality can only improve if all twelve criteria are included. Below this diagram reference is made to Gehl Architects Consults for further development. However, the Gehl Architects project books briefly describe the twelve criteria, but these have not been applied. Currently, it is not clear how to implement the toolbox for design.

This research contributes to fill this gap, by creating templates for each quality criteria, that can be used as a tool to collect and process information from notes, counts, routes, photos and scores. The present research also contributes to define links between the quality criteria, as shown in the figure 1.8. It can be seen that people must first be offered protection against traffic and accidents. By creating a safe traffic situation, unpleasant sensory experiences such as noise and exhaust fumes are reduced. Once this has been achieved, sufficient space can be made available for walking. By removing obstacles on the street such as unorganized bicycle parking, it is possible to add opportunities that lead to interaction between people such as talk/listen, stand/stay and play/exercise.

By creating opportunities to sit, people can enjoy the positive aspects of the climate. In the appendix, there is a guidebook where the steps are described with V&D Haarlem as an example. Since it concerns a heritage context, a number of quality criteria were already present. This ensures that a number of criteria must be preserved and determines what to focus on. In the case of Haarlem, the monumental buildings offer opportunities to see and positive sensory experiences. Therefore, the focus was on the left part. For example, when transforming an industrial area, the focus will be more on the right-hand part. By offering people protection against crime and violence, people feel comfortable and can enjoy the sightlines of the opportunities to see. This makes it possible to see the scale and positive sensory experiences such as detailing of the delight part. Knowing the interrelations between the 12 quality criteria can support designers in prioritising redesign actions, to achieve a user experience-based design of the public space in historic city centres. By writing guidelines with V&D Haarlem as a case study, this can help other designers to apply the toolbox for a user experience-based design of the public space in historic city centres.

The research paper has been submitted to the conference Heritage for the Future which is being held in Paris. Improving the urban quality of the public spaces is crucial to adapt the historic cities for a sustainable future while preserving its valuable heritage.

The design recommendations of the case study could contribute to society by being an addition to the Spatial Planning Act of the Municipality of Haarlem. The Spatial Planning Act shows the vision of the municipality of Haarlem for 2040. A number of areas have been designated as transformation areas, where collages provide an image of the new design. However, no specific plans for the historic centre are shown. The design recommendations of the case study could contribute to give an impression of how to adapt the most important junction for a sustainable future. The methodology can be used to adapt other important places in the historic city centre as well.



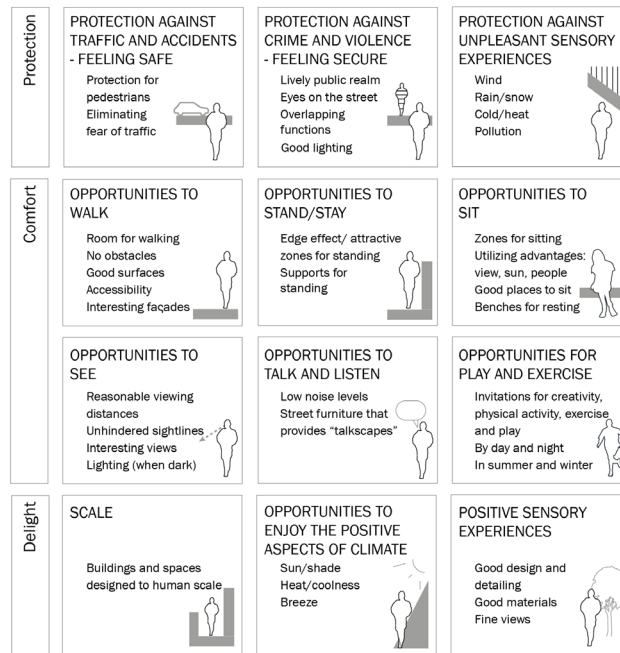


Figure 1.7 12 quality criteria (Gehl, p. 239), 2010

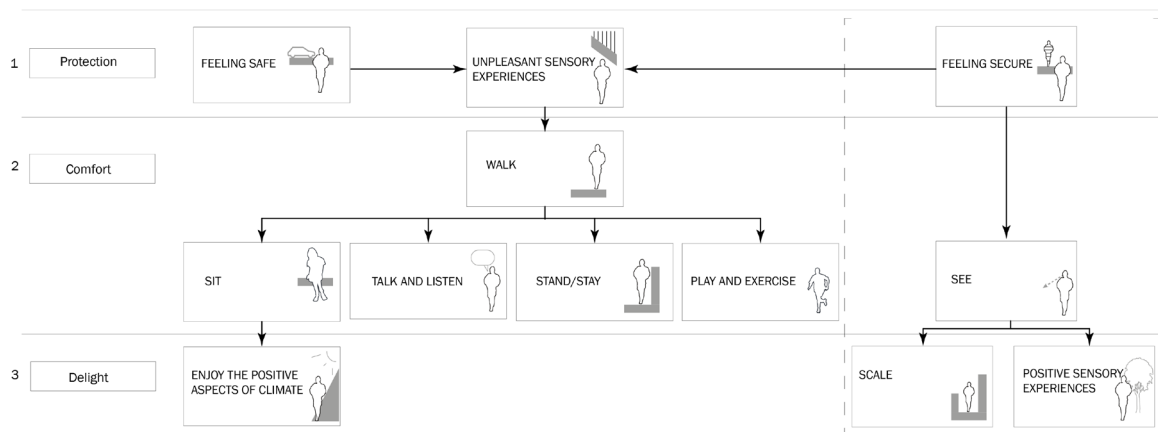


Figure 1.8 Interrelated quality criteria, 2021

## The Dilemmas of the Graduation Project

During the research and design process, I noticed that my heritage position changed. During my bachelor's degree at the University of Applied Sciences, the focus was on conservation. It was about preserving valuable heritage, but the graduation project showed me the possibilities of making a building future-proof through interventions while respecting those heritage values.

To design these interventions, various design principles can be used to lead to a new balanced result. A design principle can be a reference when it comes to returning the ideas of the existing building with a new interpretation. It is not about literally copying design elements, materials or shapes, but the concept of the design. This is reflected in my design, for example in the void. Over the years, the former octagonal void was replaced by a rectangular void with escalators. The themes of this void were light, connection between floors and innovation.

Bringing back the void, but in a new shape with rounded corners and a ramp, brings back the connection of the floors in a new way. The light previously came from an octagonal stained-glass dome, instead of bringing back the same kind of dome, a new interpretation has been designed. By using transparent solar panels, the new glass roof also serves as an energy generator in addition to the play of light.

This directly tackles the theme of innovation, which was previously provided by the escalators. By applying a green oasis in the form of subtropical plants such as Hotel Jakarta in Amsterdam, a new way of innovation has been realised in a heritage building. By carrying out the interventions in a different material than the existing building, a contrast is created which clearly shows the new 'layer' in the building. The flexible modules are assembled from timber and glass in a demountable way. The new addition of the void is being carried out in timber, steel and glass. These interventions make the building future-proof while respecting the heritage values.

In addition to my heritage position, my view of mobility has also changed. The result of the survey which the municipality held about the experience of de Gedempte Oude Gracht and Verwulft shows that most of the residents are complaining about the amount and size of the buses. However, at the same time the municipality says that the buses will increase with 50% by 2040. Instead of looking for a solution for the increasing vehicular traffic, I looked to divert some of the bus lines and car traffic around the historic centre of Haarlem. The city centre will still remain accessible, but will be less affected by noise and fumes. There will also be more space at Verwulft for greenery, opportunities to sit and invitations to play.

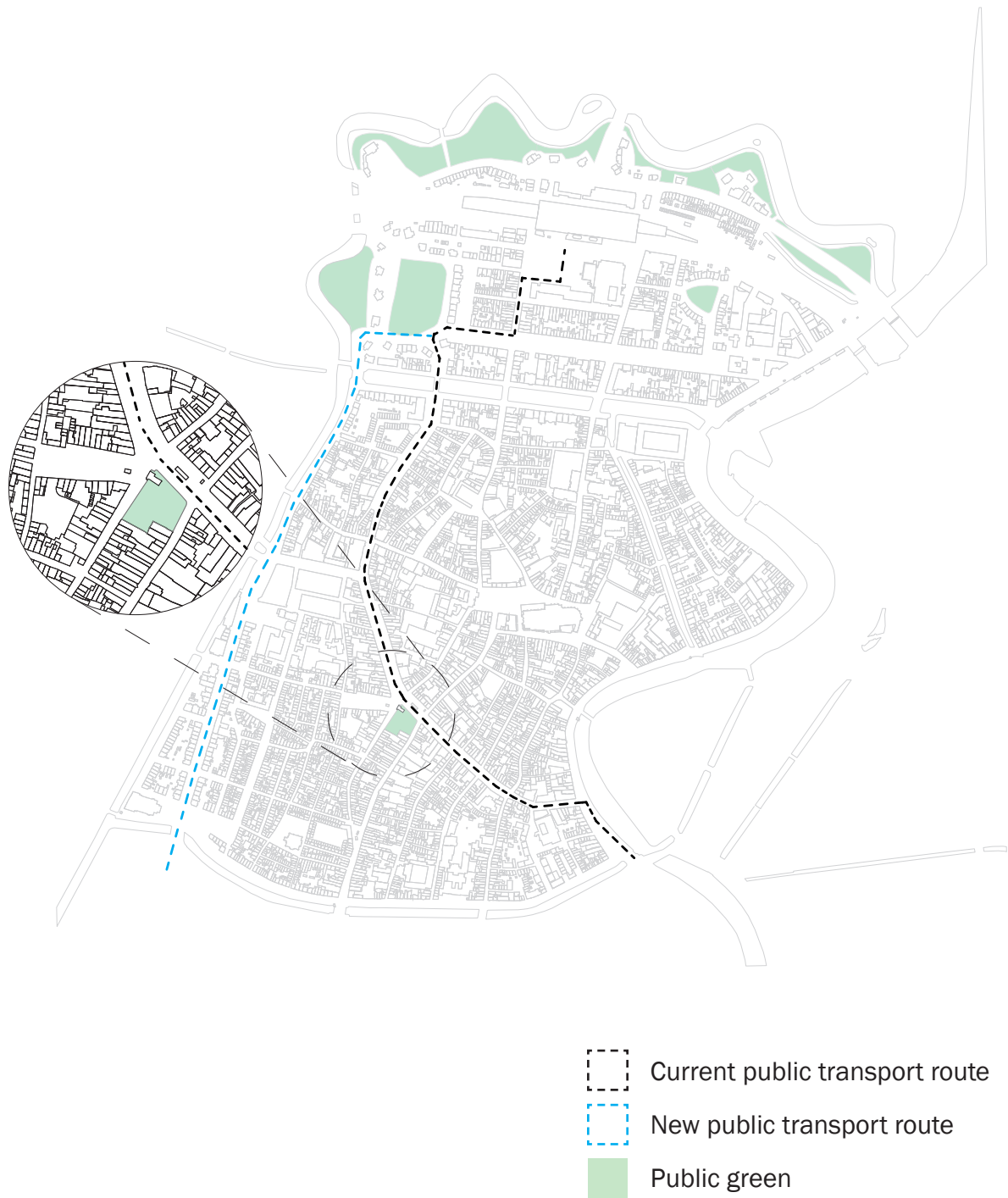


Figure 1.9 Diverting the public transport, 2021

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## Illustrations

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Figure 1.2: Mein, R. (2021). Soft Atlas V&D Haarlem

Figure 1.3: Gehl, J. (2010). 12 quality criteria concerning pedestrian landscape. Cities for People. Washington: Island Press.

Figure 1.4: Google Earth. (2021). Current context. Retrieved from:

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Figure 1.6: Hekkert & van Dijk (2014) Adapted Vision in Product Design diagram. Vision in Design, A Guidebook for Innovators. Amsterdam: BIS Publishers.

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Figure 1.8: Mein, R. (2021). Interrelated quality criteria.

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