

# DESIGNING FOR A HEALTHIER YOUTH

## **MASTER GRADUATION THESIS - REFLECTION**

Delft University of Technology  
Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment  
Veldacademie

## **WRITTEN BY**

A.H. van Gorp  
5120667

## **TUTORS**

Ir. J.A. Vink | Ir. J.D. Fokkinga | Prof. dr. ir. M. van Dorst

*Whereas at first glance, Groot-IJsselmonde appears to be a neighbourhood of good living standards - inhabitants' living experience as well as the overall quality of life within the neighbourhood correspond to those of the average Rotterdam resident-, closer examination concludes that there are several (societal) issues at hand that incentivise action in the form of spatial interventions.*

*The standardisation of facilities due to overall ageing of Groot-IJsselmonde and the insufficient use of the spatial potential of the public space within the neighbourhood have resulted in a scarcity in recreational space for youths. At the same time, the ever-expanding availability of unhealthy foods and lack of nutritional competence and physical activity among people together have resulted in an increased prevalence of overweight among adolescents, which is only enhanced by the loss of parental influence and the effects of peer pressure during this stage in life. Although there has been more focus on lifestyle prevention among youngsters, such efforts primarily target children up until 14 years old. Considering that overweight and obesity are more prevalent among high school students of 12 to 18 years old, more should be invested in prevention that targets this group specifically. This research explored what attributes and spatial elements help to create an attractive space for youngsters that simultaneously stimulates a healthier lifestyle through its programme.*

### Research question

**How to design an attractive youth centre for 12- to 18-year-old youngsters of Groot IJsselmonde (and surroundings) that simultaneously stimulates a healthier lifestyle through its programme?**

### Choice of location

The established problems have led to the definition of a specific location for the design, as illustrated in *Fig. 1*. The park zone between Hordijkerveld and Reyeroord has been argued as a suitable location for the design, as it is a vast green space at the heart of the district. It is enclosed by a tramway in the North and a busline in the South, making it easily accessible not only by foot but also by public transport. Its high amount of green and water make that it is a space of high natural quality. Yet its scale and lack of programme - as is so quintessential for a post-war garden city neighbourhood - have made the space anonymous and unused. Building on existing qualities of the green zone and adding to an active programme for its neighbouring residents - and youths in specific - will transform the park into the new hotspot for residents of Groot-IJsselmonde.

The location for the design of the youth centre will be in the middle of the park, and is defined by the water as it suggests and enclosed space.

### Aspect 1: relation between research and design

This graduation project rests on a multimethod approach (*Fig. 2*). The research started by getting an understanding of the neighbourhood as well as the target group and its characteristics, followed by a literary analysis on what (spatial) elements make a place appealing to youngsters. The output of this analysis served as a design framework consisting of spatial elements and attributes that help to achieve the type of expression/experience in the building that is desirable for the target group. Next, an analysis on reference projects of youth centres explored if and how these elements could be implemented. The outcomes of these analyses together formed the design brief for a youth centre in Groot-IJsselmonde.

Lastly, a set of workshops with two groups of 20 high school students were organised with the purpose of refining the programme of requirements, and to get an understanding of how the building will be used throughout the day, week and weekend.

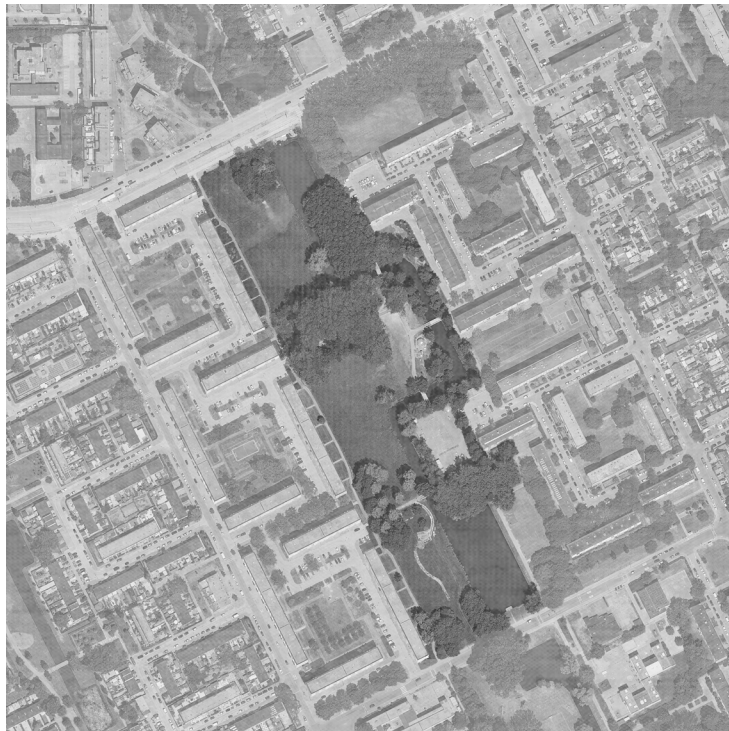


Fig. 1 design location

Both the literary review and the workshops were used as measuring tools, along which the quality of the design could be continuously evaluated.

### **Aspect 2: relation between graduation project topic, studio topic, master track and master programme**

The topic of this graduation project is in line with that of the studio, which focuses on health and resilience. Both the research and design touch upon several interpretations of health, namely: engagement, sense of belonging, exercise, and nutrition. The building itself provides a space especially for the youth, giving them a sense of belonging and stimulating their mental health by facilitating social interaction. Moreover, as the programme of the building focuses on exercise and nutrition, the project not only responds to neighbourhood-specific problems, but also addresses wider societal issues.

The studio's human-centric and practice-based approach is quite different from other studios at the faculty of Architecture. Whereas most studios take a much more theoretical approach towards the design process, this studio has taught me to acknowledge the experience of the end user as the most valuable input for a successful design.

### **Aspect 3: elaboration of the research method and scientific relevance of the work**

The research method as described in aspect 1 is in line with the philosophy of Veldacademie. This research group, consisting of researchers from various disciplines, works on societal issues in Rotterdam Zuid. Their methodology consists of quantitative research in combination with fieldwork - in the form of interviews and workshops -, treating residents and social organisations as an essential source of knowledge. Similarly, my methodology is twofold; one part consisting of literary review and case studies, the other consisting of workshops with the future main users of the building. The latter has been quite valuable to the research, as it confirmed many statements and results that were found during the literary review. Moreover, talking to the students during the workshops helped me to understand the target group and their way of thinking better. Moreover, during talks in preparation for the workshops, Silvia (teacher at Veenoord School) provided me with insights about the target group from her perspective.

During neighbourhood visits in the early stages of the research, I talked to people that know the neighbourhood quite well. I went on a walk through Groot-IJsselmonde, with two youth workers from

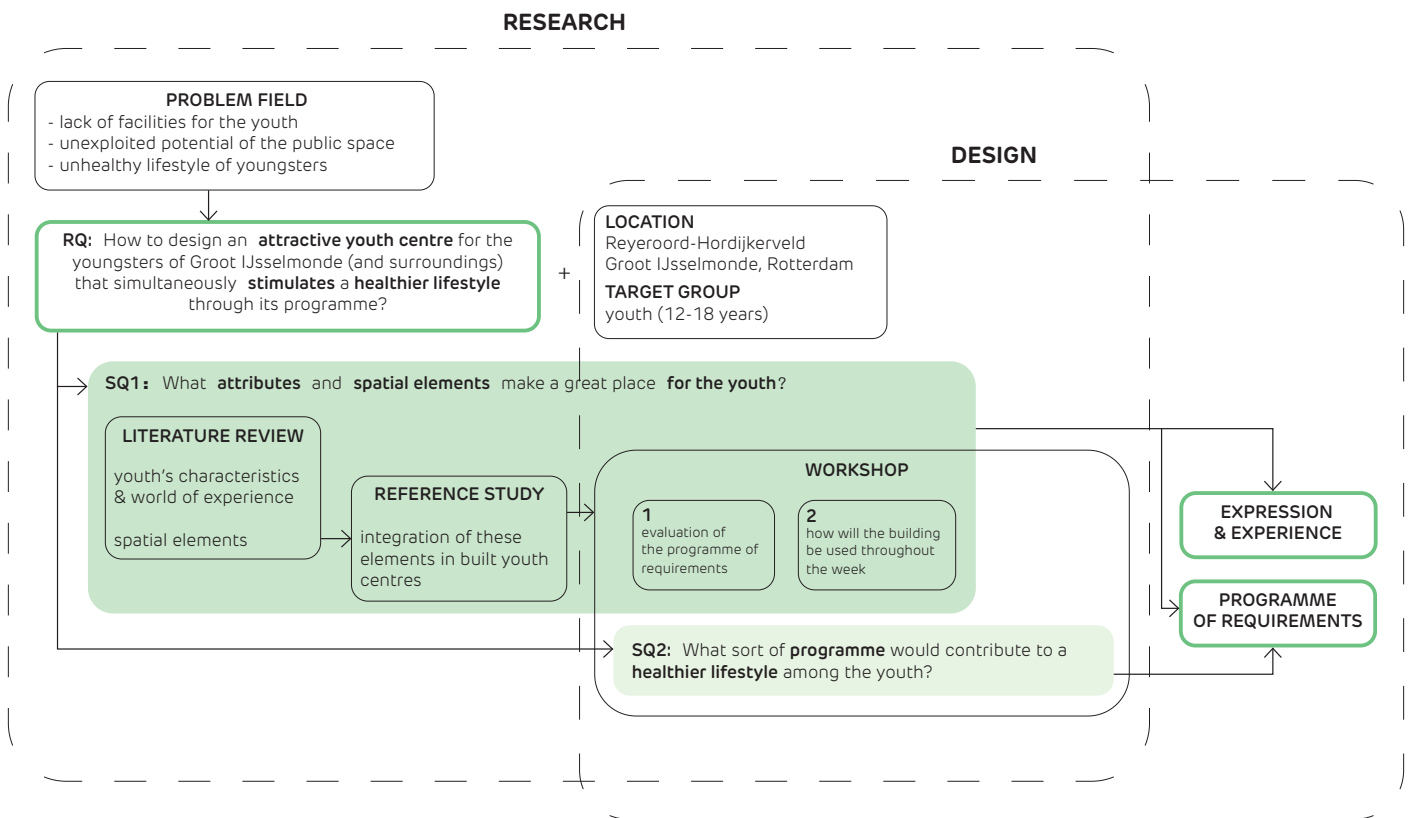


Fig. 2 methodology scheme

Pit010 to see where youngsters like to hang out; I talked to Marjolein from community garden Oeverloos; and I interviewed Marcel de Kok - owner of LifeTime Fitness. Whereas these talks did not result in qualitative input for the research, they underpinned the relevance of the assignment.

Looking back on the workshops, more preparation was needed to be able to optimise the outputs. They should have been linked more closely to the literary review, as it would have been the perfect opportunity to test the spatial elements' attractiveness towards youngsters. However, as the workshops were organised so late in the design process, many things were already decided. Ideally, the methodology should have been based on the space-making approach, in which future users of the space are actively engaged in the process from start to finish. For example, a youth-panel could have been created with whom I would meet up monthly to test and get feedback on the design.

Nonetheless, the workshops did provide insights in youths' needs and wishes in a space specifically designed for them, as well as how such a space would be used by them.

#### Aspect 4: relation between graduation project and wider social, professional, and scientific framework

Youth often tends to be forgotten in the design of public spaces. They are mostly designed with small children and their parents or elderly in mind, leaving little to no space for adolescents, let alone an actual programme. The research advocates for more youth-friendly and youth-designated spaces, and outlines a design framework of spatial elements and prerequisites which can serve as a base of and measuring tool during the design process. In that sense, the research is transferable to any urban or architectural project that targets youth. However, implementation of all these elements does not guarantee a successful project. By talking to them and engaging them in the design process, we might get a better understanding of youths' world of experience, and design spaces according to their needs and wishes. Moreover, it remains important to keep in touch with them instead of simply assume all youngsters behave the same. Needs change in time and may vary widely depending per generation, neighbourhood, and other demographic factors.

In general, it can be argued that going into the neighbourhood and retrieving data from talking to people, doing interviews, and giving workshops is far more valuable than merely relying on literature.

Practice-based research should be done more often when designing to solve societal issues, as fieldwork is a very valuable method to discover what is desirable to the people for whom we design. Especially when designing for youth, as this is a particularly difficult group to understand.

#### **Aspect 5: ethical issues and dilemmas in the research, design, and potential applications in practice**

Several challenges have emerged during both the research and the design phase.

At the start of the research, the threshold to go into the neighbourhood and approach people on the street was quite high, as it was something I had never had to do before. I was hesitant because I did not want to disturb people and found it difficult to ask the right questions without any prejudice. Especially in Rotterdam-Zuid neighbourhoods, as they are often portrayed in negative ways. Luckily, after having spoken with several people and having listened to their stories, it got easier. However, most of those talks were with adults and not youths, whom I was still struggling to get into contact with. It was actually difficult to find them in the first place, as most of them just stayed inside since Covid. So instead, I tried contacting social organisations in the neighbourhood that stay in touch with them, and went on a walk with two youth workers of Pit010 past places that are usually popular among youths. However, as I was unsure of what questions to ask them, the walk was not as fruitful as I had hoped.

In an effort to still engage with the target group itself, I contacted many schools and asked them if I could organise some workshops for their students. However, due to Covid insecurities, almost every school declined until after I had had my P2 presentation. In the end, I was able to organise two workshops at Veenoord, but they were scheduled only one week before my P3 presentation. At that point, I was too far in the process to test the spatial elements as outlined in the literature review, as had been the initial plan. Because of that, the literature review and fieldwork do not directly relate to each other, but are instead two separate parts of the research.

From the start of the design phase, I struggled with shaping the right volume. Due to the scale of the park and the lack of built context directly around the design

plot, there were almost no restrictions to help limit the possibilities. Because of that, I felt like I could not sufficiently substantiate any shape, feeling unsure about any variant I made. After marking down some restrictions and design goals of my own, I finally was able to define a substantiated volume which I could elaborate on.

Another dilemma in the design phase was about achieving a balance between stimulating physical activity and healthy behaviour on the one hand, and responding to youths' longing for space to just hang out on the other, as the latter often constitutes the opposite of physical activity. In the end, I tried to combine these two 'worlds' by embedding zones for hanging out right in the heart of activity areas, so that social interaction and people watching are facilitated, while simultaneously bringing teenagers in contact with sports, play, and healthy foods.

#### **Personal reflection**

The research-by-design method has not been put to its full potential. I have always found it difficult to go back and forth in my process, and instead prefer to work in chronological order. If I try to work at more than one thing at the same time, I get overwhelmed and lose focus. I first want to have all the information before I start designing. However, that is not how a design process works, which is why I have been struggling quite a lot throughout the year. Moreover, being a perfectionist and not wanting to make any mistakes has often led me to not getting anything on paper and procrastination of decision-making, which impacted my design process in a negative way and left me very insecure. This finally resulted in postponing my first P4 presentation and instead take it in October, which allowed me to rethink my design choices and develop the design into something that I was more confident about. However, as insecurities set in again, I ran into the same issues as before the first P4, which resulted in a similar situation right before the second P4 date.

To conclude, this year has been very tough, frustrating and confronting, and I learned a lot about myself and things I need to work on. I am however proud that despite these struggles, I managed to get through it. I want to thank my mentors - Machiel, Jacques, and Jelke -, again for their comforting words at difficult times, and for expressing their confidence in me when I needed the reassurance.