

PERCEPTIONS OF SPACE

MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE BLIKFABRIEK

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HOBOKEN AND KIEL

During the first weeks of the research project, my focus was the residents in the neighbourhood around the Blickfabriek. With the intent to meet the neighbours, we took several walks in Hoboken and Kiel, initiating conversations with residents and observing the behaviour and spatial characteristics in the neighbourhood. Hoboken is primarily residential, with limited social spaces, while Kiel, a denser and more vibrant area, features a more lively street scene with shops and eateries. Kiel, in particular, is known for its multicultural character.

When searching for the social spaces in the two neighbourhoods, we discovered that the different groups do not mix in the third spaces, for example in the cafés, eateries and some shops. However, in the multicultural neighbourhood Kiel, there are more social organisations where different groups come together. To illustrate, there are organisations like SAAMO, a community service, and NOVA, a social cultural organisation. Next to that, there are individuals doing social work within their street. In newspapers, Kiel is often portrayed as the most fragile and problematic neighbourhood of Antwerp, but as an outsider, I was surprised by the social networks in Kiel.

For my individual research I would like to focus on the multiculturalism of the site. There are a lot of different social and cultural groups in the neighbourhood, and they all experience and use the city and spaces differently.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

In *In search of new public domain*, Reijndorp and Hajer (2001) talk about the importance of exchange between different groups in the public space. This confrontation can lead to 'a shift of perspective: through the experience of otherness, the self-evident own view of reality gets competition from other views and lifestyles.' (Reijndorp, Hajer, 2001). Places where interactions between different social groups take place, is defined as public domain. Most public domain experiences happen, when entering the parochial space of another social group, because here you interact with another group fully expressing themselves. Therefore, it is interesting to explore the spatial qualities of the parochial spaces for different groups.



The interior of Cantin in Blickfabriek. (2024)



A shop open at night on the Sint-Bernardsesteenweg in Kiel. (2024)

AN OPEN SYSTEM

I'm interested in what Richard Sennett (2018) wrote about an open city. In an open city, there is a good relationship between the built environment (*ville*) and the life (*cit *) in a city, and people manage the complexity of living together with people from different backgrounds. Sennett mentions 5 open forms for an open system: **synchronous** (multiple things happening at the same time), **punctuated** (having places of character, both places that stand out, as well as places to pause and reflect), **porous** (having an open flow between the inside and outside), **incomplete** (not a particular configuration is imposed at the start, but there is room for changes and upscaling) and **multiple forms** (there is no 'the open city', similar to planting a seed, the outcome will vary depending on the circumstances) (Sennett, 2018). This led me to consider that the Blickfabriek possesses several qualities that characterize it as an open system: for instance, there are multiple activities happening in the complex, and the space and layout is flexible for new uses and changes. Still, to whom does it feel open? There are some neighbours that frequent the Blickfabriek, for example large families lacking space in their home, or teenagers that feel they are not judged here, but the majority of neighbours do not enter. If the open system should allow for interaction between different groups, should it not feel open for all? And what spatial elements make the Blickfabriek open to some people, and repellent to others?

This leads to my research question: *how is the Blickfabriek perceived by different residents in the neighbourhood?* One building, and a hundred (?) different ways to look at it. Hopefully this research would provide insight on how the different groups in Hoboken and Kiel experience a public space. When designing the masterplan, these different perspectives could provide as a guide to make an inclusive design.

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INSPIRATION FOR METHODS

Before describing my own method for this research I'd like to start by two sources that inspired my actual method.

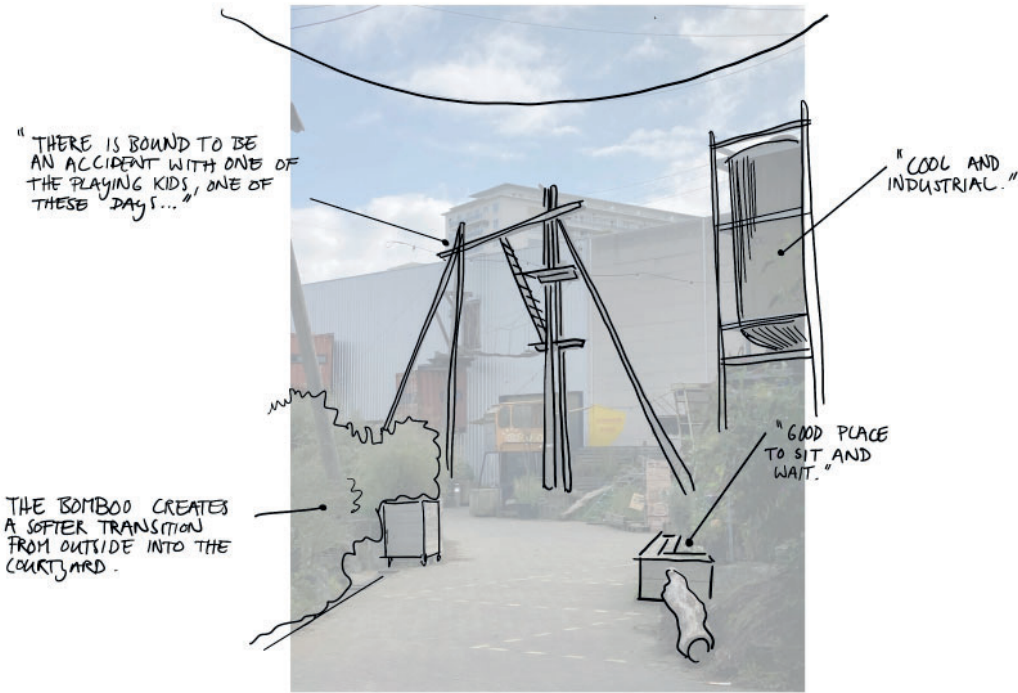
In *Image of the city*, Kevin Lynch (1959) describes a method, with a list of questions for a participant. The answers, which contain both descriptions and drawings from memory, the researcher transforms into Lynch maps. Different people experience the city differently and therefore create different maps. This method visualizes personal 'images of the city'. The Lynch maps are made for a bigger scale, a whole city, and the same method does not work on the smaller scale I'd like to study, which is the Blickfabriek. Moreover, I think maps might not visualize the complete perspective. Details, such as the posters that are hanging there, the types of chairs and materials, create an association and therefore have an impact on how people experience the space and in how likely it is they would participate or like to use it. Transforming results from questions into drawings of personal images of the city is inspiration I want to take from this book.

The research *Learning from Levittown* is more similar in scale (Venturi, Izenour, Scott Brown, 1992). As part of a workshop at Yale University, students studied Levittown, as a symbol of 'popular culture'. They analysed homes in this suburb, and presented their findings in the exhibition *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City* with big life-size photos of spaces in- and outside of the home, with text bubbles over it pointing out their findings. In these suburbs, the residents made small interventions to communicate over ownership, personal identity and personal freedom. It is often these little interventions that make someone feel in place. For that reason, I want to zoom into this scale for my personal research. The method of annotating photos, I will use in this research.

METHODS

As a method I want to organise participation sessions with a diverse group of residents of Hoboken and Kiel, varying in age, gender and ethnicity. The goal is to explore how different individuals perceive the same space in unique ways. During these sessions, I will use a series of questions to understand how participants experience and interpret the public space. For example, I will ask: What objects or features in the space feel inviting

Posters hanging at the entrance of Cantin in Blickfabriek. (2024)



Example of how to visualize results: using a photo and drawing, pointing out the findings.

to you? What qualities of the space make you feel comfortable or at ease? Are there areas you would avoid? If so, why? Do you associate any specific memories or emotions with this space? These questions will help uncover the diverse ways in which individuals relate to and navigate the space. Next to these questions, I think it is important to bring visual material. Visuals can help provoke thoughts and memories. Therefore, I want to bring a number of (four?) different photos of the Blickfabriek.

To open up the conversation further than just the interior present in the Blickfabriek, I thought I could bring cut-outs to the sessions of spatial furniture, like lamps, chairs, tables, plants etc., from other places, so people can respond on these elements. I hesitate to use this method because it may be too prescriptive: the cut-outs I don't provide cannot be selected by the participants. With the method of auto photography, on the other hand, the participant takes charge by deciding what is worth to capture. This method could be applied both inside and outside the Blickfabriek. Inside, it would offer a fresh perspective on the building, revealing which details participants choose to capture as significant. Outside, it would provide insights into the spaces participants frequent and where they feel a sense of belonging, bringing additional spatial elements into the research beyond those found in the Blickfabriek itself. If participants do not feel comfortable taking photos, taking walks with the participant could also be a method to inspire conversations.

PARTICIPATION IN DESIGN

Participation could also have a role in the design phase. The way Sennett describes planning an open city, reminds me of how SAAMO organizes projects in the public space. Diether, a social worker at SAAMO, told us they do everything with a five year plan. They take a long time defining the needs by discussing with everyone who wants to be involved and together, they change the public space step by step. This seems to be a reason the projects are widely supported. It contrasts with typical urban developments, where a final plan for an entire area is imposed with little opportunity for residents to provide input or engage in further discussion. At SAAMO, planning is driven by careful listening and a gradual, step-by-step approach. For my design project I would like to take this approach as an inspiration: using participation for listening to the needs of the neighbourhood and making a design that could be built in phases. This way, the research method I develop contributes to this process of participation in design.

PERCEPTIONS OF SPACE

MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE BLIKFABRIEK

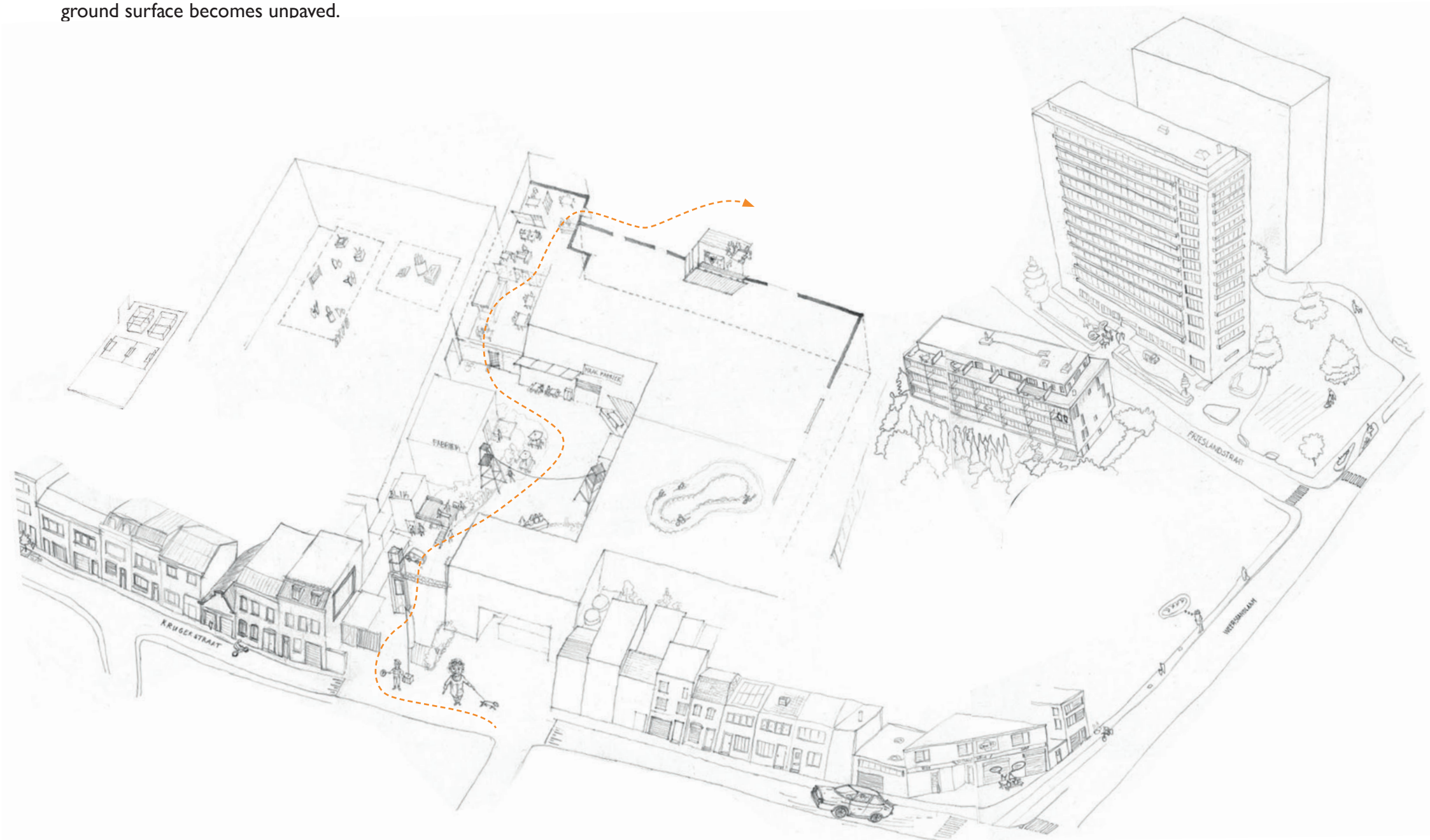
THE BLIKFABRIEK

The spaces in the Blikfabriek I'd like to focus on are the 'porous spaces' of the complex. So this means not the ateliers and workspaces, but the spaces, that are open to the public. The Blikfabriek can be entered from two sides: there is the main entrance on the Krugerstraat, which is mostly used, and the gate at the end of the Frieslandstraat.

The Blikfabriek features a sequence of diverse and engaging public spaces, both indoors and outdoors, stretching from one entrance to the other. Upon entering through the main gate, constructed from scaffolding, with signage and posters. Just beyond the gate, you'll find the bike parking area. Continuing into the courtyard, there are ziplines, wild vegetation, and various seating arrangements. Next is the Cantin, with its sculptural bar, room dividers, and planters. Finally, through the backdoor, you enter the backyard, a lush space filled with dense greenery, the ground surface becomes unpaved.

Top: Drawing made of the Blikfabriek, showing it's interaction with the neighbours (collective drawing of my research group P1, 2024).

Bottom: sequence of space through the porous part of Blikfabriek (2024).



PERCEPTIONS OF SPACE

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ANNOTATED LIST OF REFERENCES

Hajer, M., Reijndorp, A. (2001). *Op zoek naar nieuw publiek domein*. NAI Uitgevers.

In this book, the importance of exchange between different social groups is explained. It gave me a new view on public spaces. The book describes parochial space, a space that is in essence public, but because of the appropriation by a certain group, a stranger does not feel in place. The dominance of a group in these spaces are however not a threat for public domain, but can enhance a ‘public domain experience’.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Blackwell Publishing.

Lefebvre developed a conceptual triad of space: there is the perceived space, conceived space and the lived space. The third is where the focus in this research lies, which is “the individual, subjective experience of space, shaped by symbols, images, and personal emotions.” This is a book I’d still want to read.

Lynch, K. (1959). *The image of the city*. The MIT press.

The theory that every person has its own ‘image of the city’ is something I would like to build on. There is a list of questions at the end of the book, questions that are open but precise. I have to make new questions since I’m researching on a different scale, but it can help me formulate good questions.

Sennett, R. (2018). *Building and dwelling: Ethics for the city*. Penguin.

This book is an advocate for an open city, which embraces the complexity of a city with different groups. Reading the book gave me the idea it could answer how to make people integrate with one another. After reading about the qualities of an open city, it led me to consider that the Blickfabriek possesses several qualities that characterize it as an open system.

Venturi, R., Izenour, S., Scott Brown, D. (1992). ‘Learning from Levittown. The Home’, in: *On Houses and Housing, Architectural Monographs No. 21*. Venturi Scott Brown and Associates

As a result of fieldwork research, findings were presented with big photos of researched spaces, pointing out small interventions of the residents with prominent text bubbles. It is often these little interventions that make someone feel in place. The way of presentation could be an inspiration for presenting results, since I’m researching a similar scale.