

Reflection Noud van de Mast

Project 'Buurtenergie'

Architecture Graduation Studio Explore Lab

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Relation between the project, the master track, and the MSc AUBS program

My graduation project explores the role of architectural interventions in public space within the context of a hyperdiverse society. The topic naturally operates in the field of architecture and urbanism, since it deals with how design influences everyday use, social encounters, and inclusivity in the city. This is especially relevant nowadays, as many public spaces are designed in ways that exclude people or limit spontaneous interaction. Designers must therefore be conscious of how their decisions affect users at multiple scales.

At the urban scale, my project focuses on existing flows, facilities, and most importantly, the diverse people already present in the neighborhood. At the architectural scale, it deals with designing spaces, program, and facilities that support appropriation and easy use. I further extend this into building technology by integrating shafts and basic utilities throughout the building, enabling 'low-threshold' programming and flexible occupation.

Influence of research on the design, and influence of the design on the research

My research provided me with a solid theoretical foundation. I gained new insights from literature on architecture, urban theory, and sociology. Observations in the neighborhood helped me understand the dynamics of daily life and how people use architectural interventions to interact with or in the public space. Together, the theoretical study and observations formed the basis for my catalogue and a set of principles that guided the design.

For example, I used the catalogue to experiment with age groups. By forcing myself to consider what each group might desire or require, I created a reflective tool for checking whether my design could support diverse users. Not every aspect is as important and needed to appear in the final proposal, but the method helped ensure that the design offered possibilities rather than fixed solutions.

Overall, I approached the project as an exploration of how architecture and urban design can redefine public space in a hyperdiverse context. To me, public space should be redefined to a space that allows for interaction, appropriation, and experimentation, grounded in mutual respect. This includes establishing conditions and principles, like accessibility and connectivity for everyone, basic infrastructure such as electricity, water, and internet for low-threshold programming, and a diversity of spatial types (from high to low, open to enclosed, and the in between). Additional program can activate public space, but it should never exclude people through commercial requirements or entry fees. In this sense, even a café can be considered part of the public realm if it allows for personal use without obligatory consumption. My tutors supported this approach and ensured that each design step reinforced my redefinition of public space.

Assessment of my approach, methods, and methodology

From the beginning, I aimed to use methods I had little experience with, seeing graduation as an opportunity to learn rather than rely on familiar skills. My theoretical research was relatively straightforward but informative. Observing the neighborhood was new for me. Although I had hoped for deeper insights, the method still provided valuable starting points. A more complete study, with interviews and long-term observations, would have required more time and a research-team, but the results sufficiently informed my design intentions.

The design process itself was challenging. The building I selected is large and could not be visited, so I decided to build a physical model to understand scale and spatial qualities. The model gave me a tangible understanding of scale, but my perfectionism sometimes made it difficult to experiment freely with a model that was still “unfinished.” It only became truly useful to me once the construction was mostly assembled. I believe we, tutors and I, underestimated the workload of modelling, 3D-printing and assembling, but without it, I would likely have made less grounded design decisions. It allowed me to experiment, test program, and explore spatial relationships in a tangible way.

Working without a predetermined program of requirements was also difficult for me. To avoid simply inventing a program and filling the building with it, and I spent several weeks exploring possibilities through sketches, diagrams, and model interventions. At times this felt ‘inefficient’, since I like working towards a goal, but the exercises eventually converged into a coherent system for the project. My tutors were guiding me well in this exploratory process.

Academic and societal value, scope, and ethical implications

The project is socially relevant, particularly in hyperdiverse cities such as The Hague, where inclusion and social cohesion are under pressure. Public space plays a crucial role in enabling encounters and buildings tolerance among diverse groups. Designing porous and open public spaces contributes to urban wellbeing. Academically, the project adds to ongoing interdisciplinary discussions on inclusive cities. By integrating perspectives from sociology, architecture, and urban design, it explores how architectural elements can support inclusive public space.

Ethically, I was aware of the risks of generalizing user groups. People often belong to multiple ‘categories’, and their needs shift over time. For that reason, I focused on offering possibilities rather than prescribing exact uses. When imagining scenarios, I based characters on people I encountered during my observations, as they best reflect realistic behavior and use patterns.

Transferability of results, social safety and feasibility

My project can be seen as an experiment in designing and redefining public space with the hyperdiverse user at its core. The strategies I developed, ranging from low-threshold infrastructure to spatial diversity and flexible program, are transferable to other contexts. They demonstrate how design can support appropriation, interaction, experimentation, and retreat to build towards an inclusive and socially cohesive city.

However, designing these spaces also brings up questions related to social safety. While architects cannot fully resolve issues such as ‘unwanted behavior’, they can mitigate risks through lighting, transparency, eliminating blind corners, and creating passive social oversight. These measures contribute to a more secure environment without over-regulation.

Another question concerns the feasibility of the proposal. Its realization would likely require a supportive municipality and philanthropic funding. Examples such as 'Het Plein' at the Fenix Museum show that such models can work when supported structurally. Daily involvement of community workers and volunteers would also be crucial for organizing activities, maintaining facilities, and ensuring a welcoming atmosphere.

Towards P5

Looking ahead to P5, I aim to further develop the physical model. While the drawings can also still be refined, the model provides the strongest means of communicating spatial qualities, program, and atmosphere. It allows materials, scale, and use to be experienced more directly. If possible, I would like to create short videos or GIFS using a greenscreen to illustrate how different people could use the space.