

RESEARCH PLAN



Urban Sanctuaries

How can modern urban spaces support retreat, reflection, and community in the city?

Cities are busier than ever, yet people still seek places for solitude, reflection, and connection. Historically, churches offered a communal space where people gathered for introspection and shared experience. However, the role of the church has diminished for many in modern society, leaving a gap in spaces that allow for these moments of reflection and connection. Yet I think there is still a yearning for these types of places and experiences.

An example of such a place for me is the harbour bath in Aarhus, Denmark. This was a bathing place in the ocean where people went in summer and winter. During my exchange period I went there to swim and go to the sauna. It was free in the weekends, so this made it very publicly accessible. It was a place where you were amongst other people, and still were able to have a moment for yourself.



Importantly, places of retreat are not limited to grand urban spaces but can also be found within or near the home, such as a nearby park, a quiet nook, or a balcony. I am interested in the different spaces people appropriate for this purpose. I hope to find places that people use that fight the growing loneliness and stress people feel in the urban environment.

Over the last century, both society and architecture have evolved in ways that significantly influence stress levels in daily life. Factors like urbanization, technology, lifestyle changes, and shifts in community structures have transformed how we experience and cope with stress. Interestingly, the role of the church—and more broadly, community and spiritual spaces—has also shifted, influencing how people find solace and community support.

Through this research, I hope to uncover spaces that foster connection, help mitigate urban loneliness, and allow people to relax and recharge. I also want to better understand the role these spaces play in urban life, both in fostering community and in providing essential moments of peace and reflection.

Research Methodology

I plan to conduct interviews with individuals, mostly local to Hoboken, to learn about their chosen places of retreat: what these spaces are, their size and scale, how accessible they are, and the activities people engage in there. The nature of these activities is essential, as they draw individuals to these spaces even when strangers are present. Accessibility and cost are additional factors I intend to explore, as I believe that free or low-cost, easily accessible spaces are essential for community-oriented reflection. As a comparative research I also plan to analyze some spaces outside of Hoboken, in lower or higher urban density.

To document these places I plan to make models of the important elements in a 1:33 scale, just like the urban fragment models. I hope to end up with a comparative sketch model set. To prepare for the interviews, and to make them comparative, I've made a set of questions. Questions so far:

- from a scale 1 to 10 how stressed are you over the last two months?
- did you grow up in an urban environment?
- what is a place where you can reflect and get calm?
- is there a public space with these qualities?
- is there an activity you do in a group that relaxes you?
- what are your favorite spots in and around the house?
- what makes this space have this quality?
- what materials are used in this space?
- is it close or does it have a view on nature?
- is it closed off from the city, partly open or out in the open?
- how active are these spaces from 1-10, 1 being passive and 10 being active?
- What are the acoustics like, is there an echo, silence or background noise?

To start out this process, I documented one of my own urban sanctuaries around my house. You enter our apartment through the hallway, because this former office building wasn't made to be an apartment building. Because of the storage downstairs, our apartment is half a story higher than the sidewalk. We have a tiled garden on street level with a balcony and a staircase to connect the two spaces. Because this balcony is not used as an entry way to the house and is slightly above the street level, this leaves a perfect in between space that can be used as a peaceful space. There is still a connection with the life indoors and the life on the street, but it's far enough from both to feel protected. The fence of the balcony is perforated steel, but feels more closed than open. It might not look like much, but in the summer it is a perfect place to flee the life in house while still feeling connected. I tried to portray this space in a cardboard sketch model.



The balcony with the view from the balcony



Cardboard model of the balcony

Hoboken

Hoboken is an interesting area to do this research. There is a lack of good public spaces. This is because it once was a highly industrialized part of Antwerp, that has undergone significant shifts as industries have declined, leaving behind an architectural and community landscape that is transforming a lot. With the plans of the municipality to make this a real part of the city, Hoboken is going to densify. Most of the people that moved here, did this to seek tranquility. There is also a lack of social cohesion between different demographic groups inside of Hoboken. I'm not pretending that these urban sanctuaries can solve all the problems, but I would like to research how people connect with their area. because spa's and other wellness centers are often only for a wealthier part of society. These spaces are also not the focus of my research. I would like to find similar qualities in everyday urban life.

Sources

When reflecting on spaces within cultural references, I'm drawn to *The Sacrifice* by Tarkovsky. One particular scene stands out, where Alexander delivers a monologue to a child. The setting feels both exposed and sheltered—a space that invites stillness and contemplation. A place to slow down. Even though not in an urban environment I think this spot has a lot of the qualities I'm looking for.

Tarkovski, A. (director). (1985). *The sacrifice*.

This is an article about the role of religion and spirituality in stress and depression. This article is important because it highlights the mental health benefits associated with structured reflective and spiritual practices, such as those traditionally found in churches.

Lorenz, L., Doherty, A., & Casey, P. (2019). The Role of Religion in Buffering the Impact of Stressful Life Events on Depressive Symptoms in Patients with Depressive Episodes or Adjustment Disorder. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(7), 1238. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16071238>



Scene from the sacrifice

In *Life Between Buildings*, Jan Gehl explores the importance of shared, public spaces in urban settings and how they foster social interaction, community life, and well-being. Gehl argues that public spaces, when thoughtfully designed, encourage people to engage in what he classifies as three types of activities: necessary, optional, and social. Necessary activities include errands and commuting, optional activities are leisure-based, and social activities are interactions between people. He emphasizes that the quality and design of urban spaces impact the frequency and quality of these interactions. For example, when spaces are designed with features like benches, green areas, and walking paths, they invite optional and social activities, encouraging people to linger, observe, and interact with others.

Gehl's work is highly relevant to your research as it supports the idea that well-designed urban spaces can foster a sense of retreat, reflection, and community, even in busy city environments.

Gehl, J. (1980). *Life between buildings: Using public space*. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA8050894X>