

City Stage

A New Theatre For Delft

*whoever
comes,
can stay*

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City Stage

The Brief

The city of Delft wishes to build a new theatre, that not only replaces the existing Theatre de Veste but also aspires to engage more deeply with its citizens and society. The current theatre, located on the southern edge of the historic city centre, forms part of a cultural cluster alongside a cinema and a library. It contains a single auditorium with a capacity of 500 seats arranged over two balconies, and a stage measuring 10 × 15 metres with a fixed proscenium opening of 12 metres.

The new theatre is envisioned as a significant expansion of this offering including a main auditorium with approximately 800 seats, and a flexible Black Box designed to host more experimental and diverse performances. At present, Theatre de Veste functions primarily as a receiving venue, most often staging music and comedy productions. However, the building itself is in poor condition and cannot be feasibly expanded.

The proposal for the theatre of the future should be more than just a performance venue. It should serve as a place where audiences can engage in dialogue about culture and society; where theatre intersects with other art forms; and where people from all backgrounds feel welcome and can find meaning. It should enable performances to occur throughout the building, creating a dynamic environment that is at once festive and for the everyday, serious and playful.

The proposed site for this new theatre lies along a pedestrian zone in the centre of Delft. It is situated within a lively urban setting, surrounded by busy streets lined with small retail shops at ground level and residential units above. At the north corner of the site stands a HEMA department store, which has been built and opened in 1972. For the historic city center of Delft, a relatively large-scale building in this context. Within the same urban block are three similarly designed buildings, each housing retail spaces on the ground floor and one or two storeys of privately owned housing above. To the south of the HEMA building, a tall, slender structure marks the corner of the block and accommodates two fashion retailers. Architecturally, this area differs noticeably from Delft's historic city centre. Instead of small, narrow townhouses with pitched roofs, the urban fabric here is defined by longer, wider buildings with flat roofs. Despite this contrast in form, the material helps maintain a degree of visual continuity with the historic surroundings. This part of the city reflects a particular moment in Delft's urban development. The buildings were constructed following public protests against a proposed four-lane highway that would have cut through the historic centre.

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Theatre

Setting the Scene

Contemporary Theatre

Scenography as a Tool for Shaping Experience

Historically, Theatre relied on rigid divisions: a defined stage, a proscenium arch, and a passive, seated audience. While this traditional format remains globally popular, contemporary Theatre has radically broken these boundaries. Modern performances frequently escape traditional auditoriums to occupy streets, abandoned buildings, and digital platforms. In these settings, spectators are no longer detached observers they move through environments, interact with their surroundings, and become active participants in an immersive experience. [01]

Consequently, the physical environment is no longer a static backdrop but a dynamic component embedded in real life. This shift has fundamentally expanded the definition of scenography. Once viewed simply as decorative stage design, scenography is now understood as a tool, system, and process for structuring spaces to produce meaning and guide human perception. By organizing visual, auditory, and sensory elements, scenographic strategies influence behavior and collective emotion, a technique utilized not only in Theatre but also in festivals and political events. Scenography has thus become a generative cultural practice that actively constructs how we experience the modern world. [01]

British researcher Juliet Rufford connects this spatial design directly to architecture, arguing that the built environment is inherently performative because it shapes human movement, directs attention, and stages social behavior. However, Rufford introduces a critical caution regarding how these tactics are deployed. Today, contemporary economic and urban systems frequently co-opt theatrical strategies such as immersion, participation, and spectacle to boost consumer engagement and drive urban regeneration. When cities and buildings are transformed into commercialized „brandsapes,“ spatial design primarily serves capital and tourism. Therefore, the blurring of boundaries between Theatre, architecture, and daily life is not inherently progressive. It can easily drive the commodification of space, prioritizing economic potential over genuine community engagement. [02]

Despite this risk, Rufford highlights the democratic potential of „performance architecture.“ When design processes prioritize adaptability, live experimentation, and genuine participation, the tools of Theatre can be used to question and reconfigure existing social and political structures rather than simply generate commercial profit. [03] Ultimately, contemporary scenography operates as a multifaceted process that structures our sensory reality. It spans across disciplines to raise vital questions about whether spatial design will be used to reinforce existing power structures or to challenge them.

Theatre and Society

Theatre's Impact on Society Through Time

Traditionally, dramatic Theatre functioned as a reflection of reality, engaging audiences through emotional identification with characters and linear plots. While deeply moving, this classical approach often fostered passive empathy rather than critical analysis, obscuring the broader social, political, and economic structures that shape contemporary life.

During the twentieth century, Theatre theorists began radically rethinking this purpose. Bertolt Brecht introduced „Epic Theatre,“ arguing that performance should stimulate intellectual detachment rather than passive emotional immersion. [04] Through techniques like the alienation effect, direct audience address, and visible stagecraft, Brecht interrupted the narrative to force spectators to critically observe societal inequalities, transforming Theatre into a vehicle for political education. [05] Conversely, director Peter Brook advocated Theatre as a vital, immediate experience. In *The Empty Space*, Brook outlined „Immediate Theatre,“ which strips away elaborate sets to prioritize authentic, sensory presence and raw interaction between actors and spectators. While Brecht emphasized critical distance, Brook focused on the power of shared, unmediated space. [06]

These legacies heavily inform today's postdramatic Theatre, which prioritizes situational events over traditional text. Modern Theatre frequently blurs the boundaries between art and reality, moving out of traditional auditoriums into public squares, urban environments, or private homes. Here, audience members cross the line from passive observers to active participants. [07] This positions Theatre as an interactive social practice rather than a mere aesthetic activity. By engaging both intellectual critique and embodied sensory perception, the live theatrical event helps citizens develop communication skills, empathy, and the critical thinking necessary for democratic societies. [07]

Despite this civic value, the medium faces steep modern challenges. Cultural diversity and audience demographics remain restricted. Elitist social conventions, ticket prices, and economic barriers often exclude younger or lower-income demographics. Furthermore, Theatre must constantly compete with the immediate accessibility of digital streaming services and online media, raising urgent questions about whose stories are being told and who feels represented.

Nevertheless, Theatre remains an essential cultural forum. Through school collaborations, youth programs, and community workshops, contemporary institutions actively work to dismantle these barriers. Evolving from Brecht's political critique to Brook's immediacy, Theatre continues to serve as a forum, and a tool for collective reflection, proving it is far more than entertainment, but a vital social practice that enriches civic life.

Theatre in Crisis

Understanding Dutch Theatre Culture

Over the past few decades, the Dutch Theatre sector has faced severe operational and financial strain, driven by severe public funding cuts, evolving cultural policies, and rapidly shifting audience dynamics. Government austerity measures beginning in the early 2010s drastically reduced arts subsidies, forcing institutions to prioritize shortterm financial survival over longterm artistic risk taking. Consequently, Theatres are often compelled to chase ticket sales and operational efficiency, which frequently stifles avantgarde experimentation and cultural diversity. [08] Compounding these financial hurdles is a dramatic shift in leisure habits. The explosion of digital streaming platforms, social media, and localized festivals has highly individualized cultural consumption. Going to the Theatre requires a fixed time, location, and commitment that no longer aligns with default consumer habits. This generational shift has left audiences fragmented, highly selective, and experience-oriented. Theatre visitors now demand unique, socially relevant events rather than attending out of routine. To survive, institutions must constantly justify their value and cultivate multiple niche demographics simultaneously, creating a permanent tension between maintaining artistic identity and broadening public accessibility. [09]

This systemic pressure has also degraded the internal infrastructure of Dutch Theatre. Organizations increasingly rely on freelance labor, which has led to widespread precarity, high staff workloads, and fewer developmental pipelines for emerging artists.

The crisis has exposed a stark operational imbalance between producing Theatres and receiving houses. Producing Theatres, which actively create new work are uniquely vulnerable. They carry massive fixed overhead costs, including rehearsal spaces, long production timelines, technical crews, and creative teams. Under tight budgets, these creators are forced to scale down their artistic ambitions, cut the number of annual shows, or rely heavily on co-productions, which dilutes their creative independence. Conversely, receiving houses, venues that host touring shows, enjoy far more resilience. Because their expenses are tied to programming rather than creation, they can flexibly adapt their schedules to current market trends or local demands without long-term financial exposure. Ultimately, the combination of diminished subsidies, organizational precarity, and hyper-competitive entertainment markets severely constrains the Dutch Theatre sector's ability to innovate. Because producing houses bear the brunt of these structural imbalances, the very engine of original Dutch theatrical creation is increasingly under threat. [08]

Approach

Between City And Stage



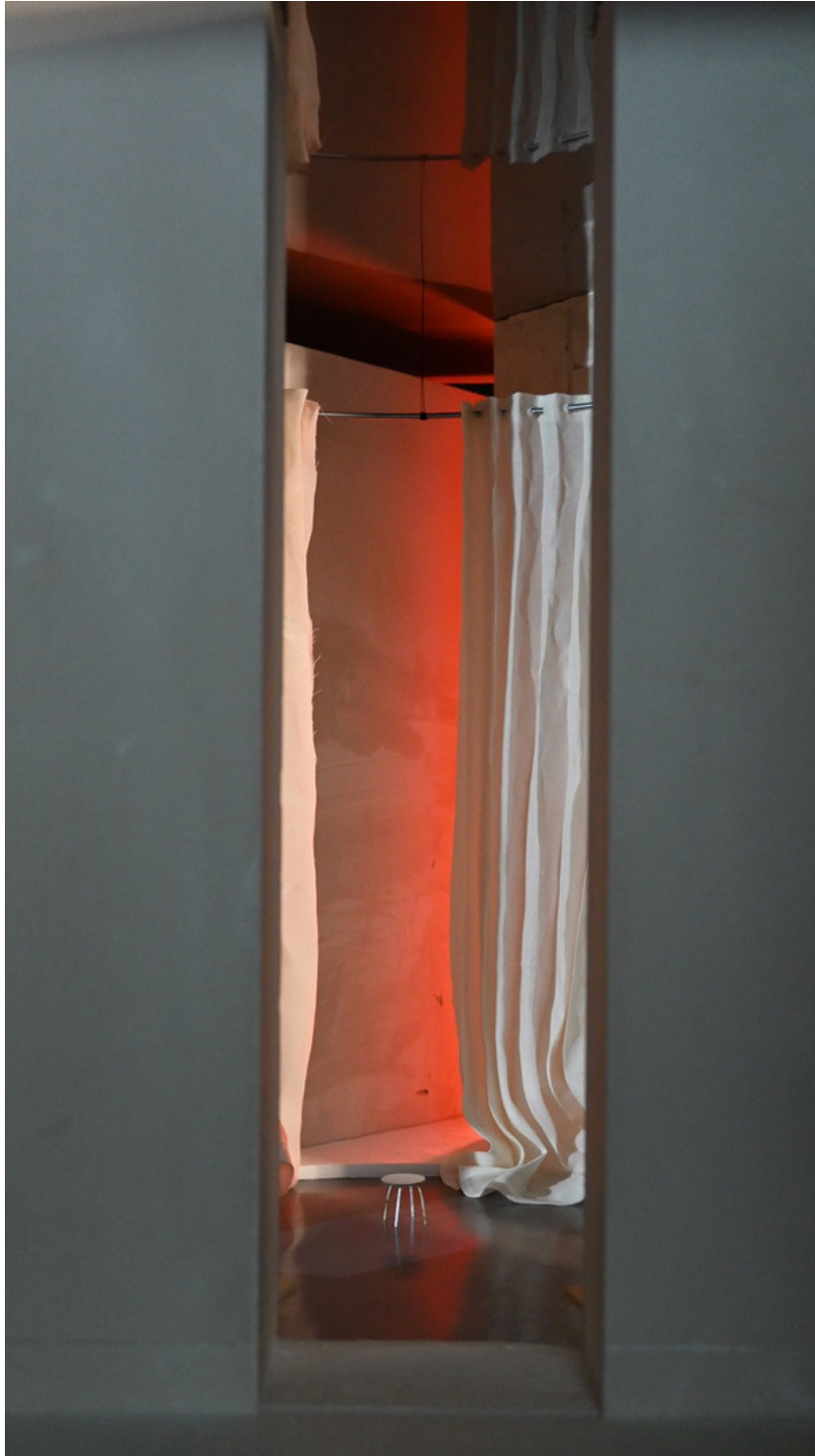
Where Space Performs

How Space and Performance become One

The relationship between Theatre and the city is defined by a deep tension between seclusion and integration. While Theatre is traditionally a secluded experience, contained within designated spaces that feels detached from everyday life, it holds a powerful capacity to alter scale and perception, transforming a defined room into an alternative reality. Blurring the boundary between reality and performance relies heavily on spatial conditions. Every space holds a distinct character shaped by light, materials, and organization, allowing it to shift from the ordinary to the performative. To explore these dynamics, two distinct design models were developed, each investigating how architectural interventions can manipulate atmosphere and challenge audience perception.

The first design focuses on an inward, highly atmospheric experience that plays with scale and material weight. The performance space is defined by four freestanding, monumental walls that do not touch, leaving strategic gaps for light and entry. Constructed from thick gypsum, these imposing walls feel cold and dense, distorting the perception of scale to make visitors feel small. Inside, the space lacks a fixed orientation and is shared equally by audience and performers. A dark, reflective floor and a highly reflective ceiling visually unify the environment, creating deep ambiguity; the massive walls appear to float while simultaneously extending infinitely upward. This rigid geometry is softened by heavy white curtains arranged circularly around a subtle, curved step that acts as a flexible, boundaryless stage threshold. The second approach shifts the focus to structural exposure and a shift from exterior to interior, creating a different spatial dialogue. From the outside, the walls appear thick and massive, but they are revealed to be hollow shells containing stepped seating integrated directly into their depth. Sitting within these dense, sound absorbing structures heightens the audience's sense of isolation and focus. Opposite this seating area, the performance space unfolds as an open, vertical volume where the structural framework is stripped down to columns and beams, emphasizing exposure and incompleteness. Augmented by shifting curtains, stairs, and precise lighting, this model introduces tension and strangeness into the environment, forcing visitors to question their surroundings.

Together, these models demonstrate that performance is no longer confined to the traditional proscenium stage; it can emerge within transitional, architecturally ambiguous settings. By employing material contrasts and structural subversions, the designs do not merely host a performance but become performative themselves, continuously negotiating the boundary between reality and fiction within the urban fabric.





The Great Good Place

Ray Oldenburg, 1989

The project centers on the sociological concept of the „third place,“ a theory introduced by American sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his influential book „The Great Good Place“. Oldenburg distinguishes third places from the primary spheres of daily life, such as The „first place“ (home) and the „second place“ (work). The third place is defined as a accessible, public environment hosting regular, voluntary, informal, and enjoyable gatherings. Typical examples include cafés, taverns, libraries, and community centers. These vital spaces either emerge organically over time through collective routines or are intentionally designed as welcoming, adaptable „empty spaces“ that support local democracy, social cohesion, and community.

Characterized by neutrality and inclusivity, true third places promote social equality by softening societal hierarchies and welcoming regulars and strangers alike. Conversation is the primary activity within these playful, relaxed environments, which frequently function as a reassuring „home away from home“ by offering psychological comfort. Culturally and civilly, they strengthen the social fabric of a neighborhood by offering physical spaces where people naturally encounter one another across diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Without these environments, civic life becomes highly fragmented, isolated, and increasingly privatized, confined strictly to a repetitive cycle between home and employment.

Crucially, not all public zones satisfy Oldenburg’s criteria. Transit hubs like train stations are publicly accessible but inherently discourage lingering, while standard third places present distinct barriers, such as commercial cafés require financial consumption, and civic libraries often enforce strict silence. Consequently, free and inclusive third places are vital for vulnerable demographics. Low income families living in cramped conditions rely on shared spaces for recreation, isolated individuals seek comfort to avoid loneliness, and immigrants or newcomers use these environments to cultivate a sense of belonging within a new cultural context.

A third place’s ultimate success depends heavily on its spatial position within the urban fabric; they thrive best when situated at key intersections, mixed-use developments, and everyday transit routes. Architecturally, their impact relies on high visibility, easy accessibility, and physical permeability, allowing citizens to easily enter, dwell, and appropriate the space in their own unique way. Ultimately, integrating third place principles into contemporary architecture highlights the necessity of designing inclusive, multi-functional spaces that invite people to linger, converse, and participate in cultural exchange, effectively weaving a single building directly into the fabric of daily urban life. [10]

Borrowing From History

The Ancestry of the Third Place Stage

Despite spanning vastly different eras and geographies, the Theatre of Dionysus, the Half Moon Theatre, and Teatro Oficina share a foundational philosophy, that Theatre must act as an inclusive, civic incubator where performance and daily life directly intersect. Rather than functioning as elitist, passive containers for art, these three architectures were deliberately designed to dismantle societal barriers, foster radical cultural dialogue, and welcome individuals from all backgrounds to find collective meaning. They operate under the belief that spatial design should actively stimulate social interaction rather than simply house it.

A central manifestation of this shared approach is the complete revolution of the traditional, rigid proscenium stage to allow performances to occur organically throughout the entire building fabric. In the ancient Theatre of Dionysus, the open air stone theatron utilized the natural Athenian topography to transform a religious sanctuary into a massive civic forum where attendance was viewed as a democratic duty. Millennia later, Lina Bo Bardi echoed this spatial democracy in São Paulo's Teatro Oficina by abdicating traditional seating entirely. Instead, she reimagined the Theatre as a narrow, 70 meter long linear street where large glass walls visually bind experimental art to the surrounding neighborhood. Spectators look down from flexible metal scaffolding directly onto a corridor shared with performers, a layout that actively breaks down the separation between art and reality. [12]

Similarly, Florian Beigel's Half Moon Theatre in London's East End fragmented its program across an urban assembly. By treating the courtyard as an outdoor foyer and performance space, adapting the main auditorium, and utilizing an old chapel as a café and musical venue, Beigel ensured that creative expression could manifest anywhere. [12]

This architectural permeability directly cultivates a dynamic environment that operates simultaneously as ceremonial and ordinary. These spaces seamlessly transition from hosting serious political resistance and societal critique to staging joyful, collective rituals. Whether through the state subsidized tickets that allowed poorer citizens, foreigners, and marginalized groups to attend the ancient City Dionysia festival, the radical working class and anti racist activism embedded in the rough materials of the Half Moon Theatre, or Teatro Oficina's structural framework of exposed concrete and steel that invites improvisation, all three projects celebrate radical inclusivity. By using raw, unpretentious, and highly adaptable design languages, these Theatres became active agents in community engagement. They successfully unified diverse art forms such as drama, music, movement, and architecture, into a singular, living civic practice where everyone belongs and can engage in a shared, democratic experience.

Location

The Space Of Performance

The City Of Delft

Urban Development of Zuidpoort, 1830 – today

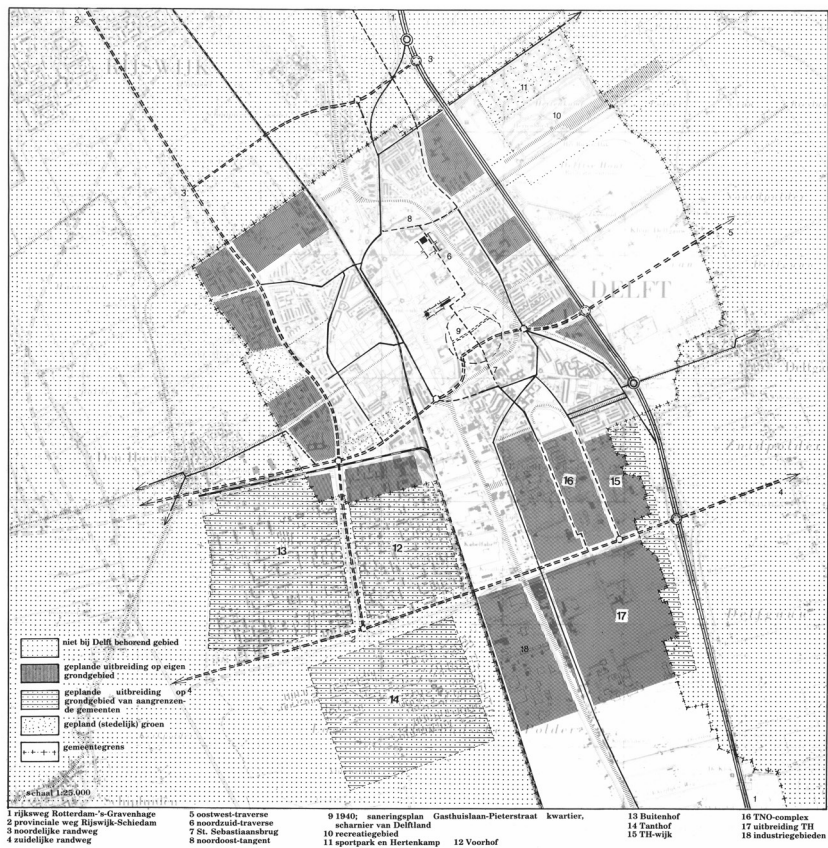
In the early nineteenth century, Delft was an economically stagnant, impoverished city of 15,000 residents. Though rich in architectural heritage, its transformation began with the modernization of the Rijn-Schie Canal, which reshaped the local geography into distinct urban islands driving industrial growth to the south and creating parklands like the Nieuwe Plantage to the north. While the interwar period shifted planning toward grand, aesthetic visions of city unity, areas like the Zuidpoort initially stagnated. Post-World War II economic losses later prompted the 1950 Structural Plan, which introduced the Organic City concept, treating traffic, housing, and green spaces as interdependent layers of a single cohesive organism. ^[13]

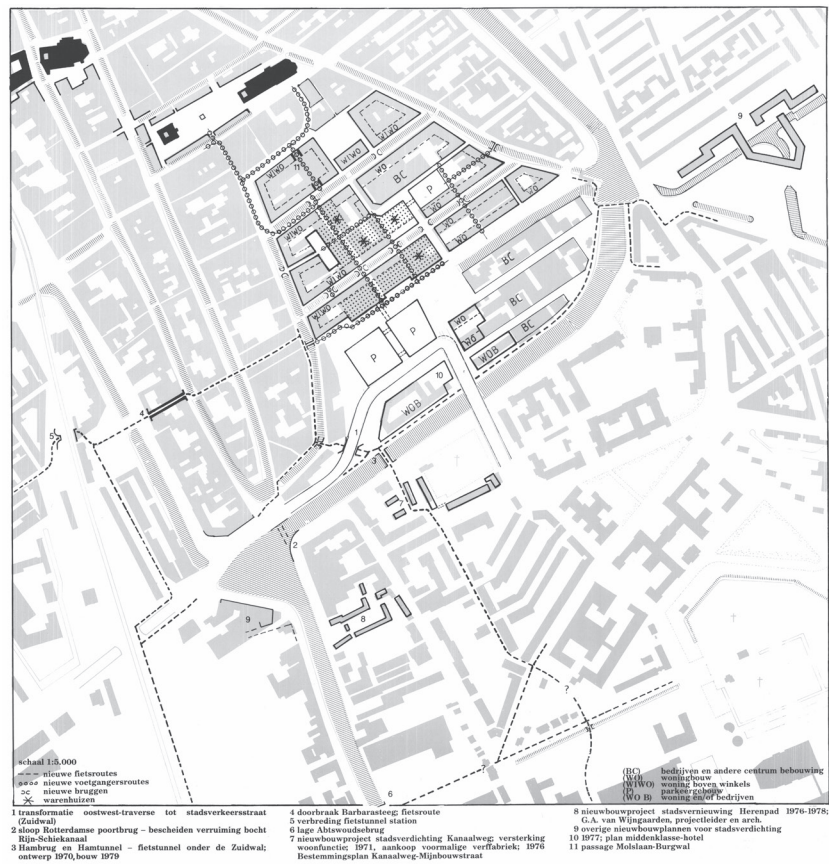
By the late 1960s, the rigid doctrines of Functionalism faced fierce opposition. Urban debates over a proposed north-south highway highlighted alternative, ecological solutions, such as rerouting infrastructure along the railroad to preserve landscape parks. This sparked a broader political shift away from only commercial prosperity toward quality of life, environmental consciousness, and public participation. The resulting strategies prioritized high-density city centers, pedestrian and cyclist networks, and mixed-use zoning that blended living, working, and recreation to prevent fragmented districts. ^[14]

Simultaneously, a new generation of Delft architects, inspired by Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger, and Christopher Alexander's essay „A City is Not a Tree“, argued that Functionalism failed to handle complex urban contexts. They advocated for flexible, process driven planning where urban form emerged from organic rules and ongoing negotiations rather than predetermined designs. This philosophy manifested in developments like In de Veste and Tanthof, which integrated finely meshed networks for pedestrians and cyclists directly into the historic city tissue. To prevent commercial isolation, large department stores were sensitively woven along canals and walkways rather than clustered around disruptive parking lots. For example, the HEMA retail company actively negotiated a site that was less favorable for vehicle traffic but rejected a proposed housing program that would wrap on top of its building. Ultimate urban forms remained deliberately flexible; deviations from rules were encouraged to foster spatial variety while avoiding monotony. ^[15]

By embracing the „Compact City“ concept, Delft radically rethought its zoning and mobility. Destructive highway projects were canceled or rerouted, and an extensive network of bike paths, tunnels, and bridges was introduced. Ultimately, the late 1960s and 1970s marked Delft's transition into a human centered public realm, transforming the Zuidpoort area into a vital public transport hub integrated seamlessly with the inner city.









Markt

Nieuwe Kerk

Maria van
Essekerk

Beestenmarkt

Oostpoort

Gasthuisplaats

The Station

Library

Bastiaansplein

Theatre
de
Veste

The Site

Urban Context

Theatre de Veste, the existing Theatre in Delft, is located on the southern edge of the city's historic center. Due to limited capacity and the poor condition of the building, the city of Delft wishes to develop a new venue with a larger seating capacity and an additional venue in the form of a Black Box Theatre.

The site selected for the Theatre of the Future is located approximately 150 meters northeast of the current location. Both Theatre de Veste and the proposed new site are situated within the previously explained redevelopment area of Zuidpoort. The surrounding buildings were constructed in the 1960/1970s as part of Delft's new urban plan.

The central idea behind the redevelopment of Delft's city center was to introduce a mixed-use structure, with small shops on the ground floor and housing above. In between the mixed-use structure the bigger retail stores found their place. Following the demolition of all buildings in the Zuidpoort area, the urban grain in this part of the city became significantly larger compared to its historic surroundings. The newly constructed buildings differ in scale and structure from the fine-grained historic buildings that previously occupied the site.

The theatre of the future lies between two city squares the Bastiaansplein and the Besteenmarkt. Bastiaansplein is a highly frequented urban square, characterized by modern highrise buildings and a high volume of pedestrian and bicycle traffic. The square attracts visitors due to the presence of the two large supermarkets, the public library, a huge underground parking facility, as well as retail stores.

In contrast the Besteenmarkt, which is just outside of the redevelopment area of the 1950s, is an intimate and atmospheric square located in the heart of Delft's historic center. It is surrounded by small, traditional dutch brick buildings with pitched roofs and is defined by numerous mature trees and a lively concentration of bars and restaurants. The center of the square functions as a shared terrace for the surrounding establishments and comes alive especially in the evening, when the entire square becomes animated and vibrant.

The Delft public library serves as the connecting element between the old and the new site, with both corners of the building oriented towards it.

The site for the theatre of the future is located within a pedestrian zone, making it highly accessible for everyday use. The northern and southern edges of the plot are bordered by canals, while the eastern and western sides are defined by buildings that combine retail functions on the ground floor with residential units above.

Exsiting Architecture

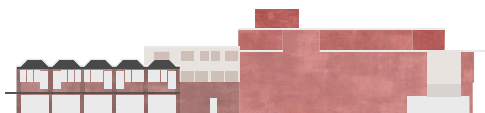
The current state of the Urban Block

This urban block consists of eight buildings arranged along a pedestrian zone in Delft's city center, with building heights varying between five and thirteen meters. The northwestern building features the largest footprint and greatest overall height within the block. On the western side, a long, narrow retail building stands out as the most recent architectural addition. Its language differs significantly from its surroundings, featuring a painted white brick facade that strongly contrasts with neighboring red-brick structures, alongside atypical, decorative circular windows and polished grey stone.

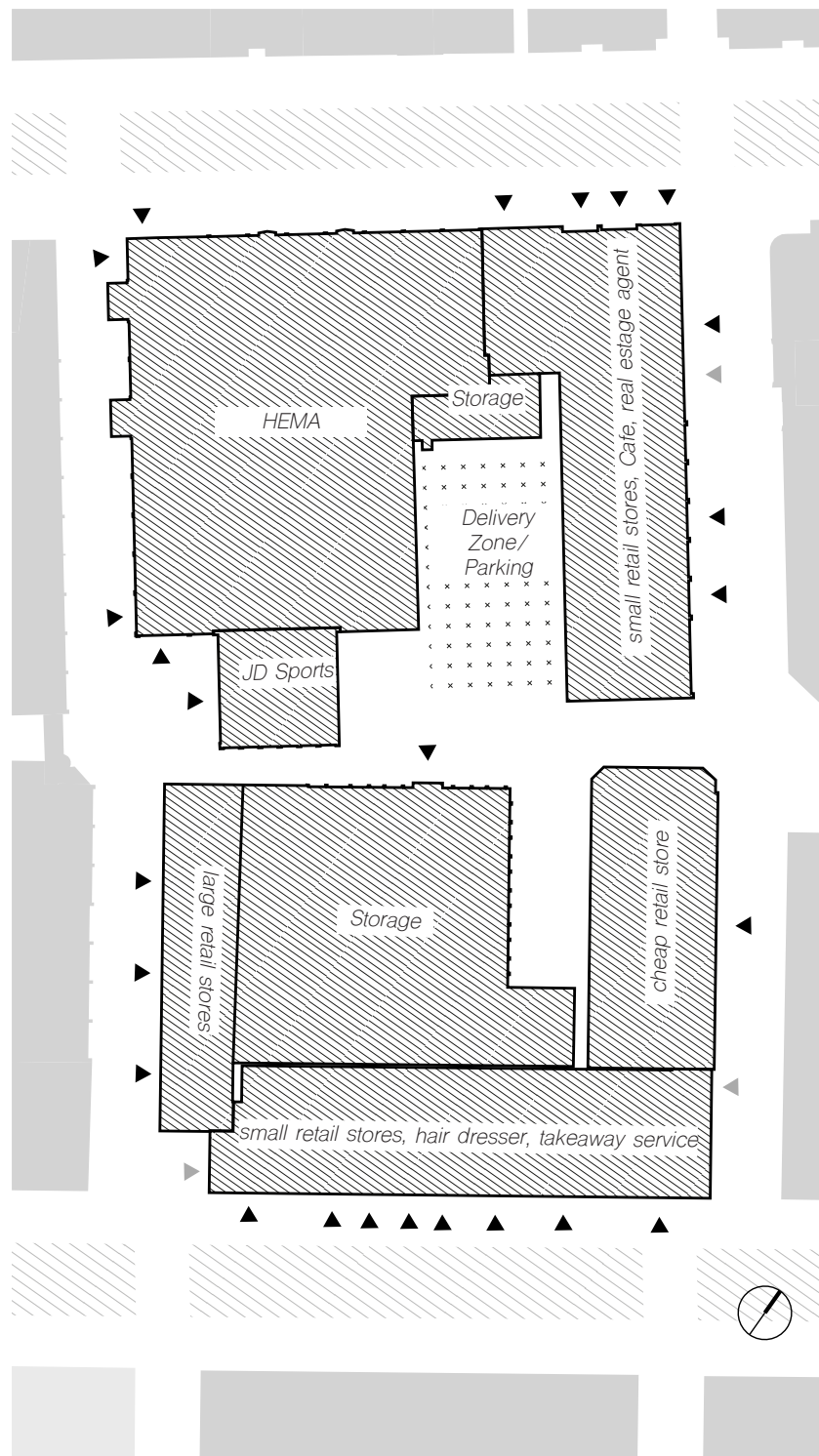
Conversely, the remaining buildings within the block maintain a consistent architectural language defined by a red-brick palette and strong linearity. The load bearing structure of brick columns projects approximately 60 centimeters from the facades to establish a distinct vertical rhythm. Just above the groundfloor shopfronts, a continuous cantilevered canopy runs at a height of four meters, introducing a unifying horizontal line across the facade composition. The ground floor of these apartment buildings houses various retail units arranged within a strict structural grid of 30 cm by 30 cm columns spaced 4.5 meters apart. Behind these structures sits an inner courtyard used for parking and deliveries, which is largely covered by a poorly integrated, low-rise storage volume attached to the large retail building.

The residential apartments on the upper floors extend across the full width of the buildings, providing one facade facing the pedestrian zone and another facing the inner courtyard. The apartment layouts are simple, consisting of elongated rectangular units approximately 5 meters wide and 14 meters deep. Access is provided from the courtyard via groundlevel and a staircase leading to an exposed external gallery on the first floor. Inside, the bedroom sits adjacent to the entrance facing the courtyard, the kitchen and bathroom occupy the dark central zone, and the living room faces the pedestrian street with a continuous window band and a small private balcony.

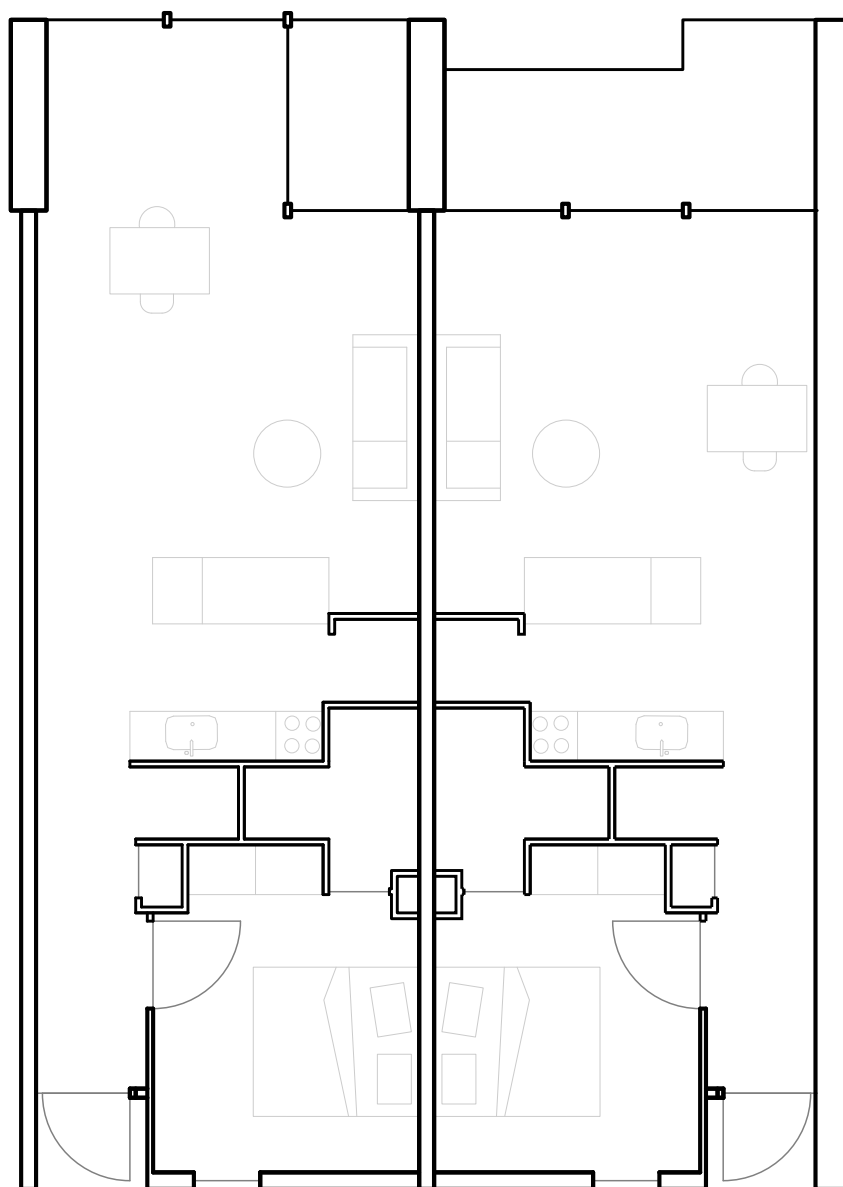
The HEMA building also follows a powerful vertical linearity, clad entirely in a lighter, more orange-toned red brick with minimal window openings. Its facade features subtle ornamental brick projections that are densest on the third floor and gradually diminish toward ground level, completed by horizontal brick bands. Internally, it is organized on a robust 9.6-meter by 9.6-meter structural grid supported by 60 cm diameter mushroom columns. The ground and first floors each cover approximately 1,600 square meters with a clear height of 4.3 meters, while the third floor measures 900 square meters with a 3.3-meter ceiling. Primary vertical circulation is provided by an eastern elevator and stairwell core.











Design Approach

Vision for the Theatre of the future

The Theatre of the Future envisioned by the City of Delft differs significantly from the existing Theatre. Rather than functioning purely as an evening destination, the new Theatre is designed to integrate seamlessly into daily urban life, remaining open and active throughout the day. Programmatically, the proposal upgrades the city's theatrical capabilities by introducing two distinct performance spaces: a primary main auditorium seating 800 spectators and a highly adaptable, 250-capacity Black Box Theatre designed for experimental and alternative art forms.

Currently, Delft's Theatre operates as a receiving house, common across the Netherlands, where production companies arrive daily to unload sets, temporarily occupying the building. However, the existing infrastructure is highly restricted with narrow loading docks, limited stage dimensions, and inadequate backstage facilities, preventing the city from hosting large scale productions while compromising working conditions for artists. The proposed site offers the spatial volume necessary to fix these logistical issues, optimize technical operations, and expand the venue's public footprint.

Central to this architectural ambition is the transition of the Theatre into a public third space. A welcoming, democratic realm between home and work where people can gather without an obligation to spend money. By shifting away from restricted opening hours and utilizing a new location along a pedestrian street with open facades, the building establishes a highly visible, permeable relationship with the city. The design moves beyond standard aesthetic entertainment to create a multifunctional cultural forum. Here, audiences can engage in social dialogue, disparate art forms can intersect, and a diverse public can experience an environment that is simultaneously festive and everyday.

Crucially, this large scale intervention must respond carefully to a dense, pre-existing urban context. Because the selected urban block includes residential units on its upper floors, the architectural massing must strictly respect these neighboring homes, ensuring that the new structure does not obstruct views or diminish access to natural daylight. Instead, the intervention aims to improve the overall quality of the shared environment, balancing vibrant public activity with residential privacy.

A major strategic opportunity on the site is the integration of the adjacent, historic HEMA building. Designed in the 1970s by Lucas & Nijmeyer, the building is deeply embedded in Delft's cultural and commercial identity. The iconic Dutch retail brand remains highly successful by shifting its corporate strategy toward affordable food, cafés, and community accessibility.

However, the upper floors of the existing structure are currently underutilized and vacant. Incorporating these empty square meters allows the Theatre project to fulfill a historic, mixed-use urban planning vision where cultural, commercial, and residential functions overlap.

The ground floor serves as the primary connective element between the institution and the urban fabric. Open to the pedestrian zone, it functions during the day as a vibrant, continuous social foyer where citizens can meet, work, study, or bring their children. The space is structurally flexible, easily accommodating informal workshops, local markets, and daytime talks, before seamlessly transforming in the evening into a traditional Theatre lobby capable of handling 800 visitors. To maximize inclusivity, the architectural transition between the Theatre foyer and the active HEMA retail store is completely seamless, sharing a common ground level entrance. This physical proximity allows the Theatre to naturally engage a wider, more diverse demographic that might otherwise feel alienated by a formal cultural institution. A newly designed, shared cafe and restaurant occupies this threshold, serving as an unpretentious social bridge between commercial retail and the performing arts.

To fully achieve a hybridized public building, the intervention reuses the vacant first floor of the HEMA structure to address a critical deficit in Delft's cultural infrastructure. It lacks of centralized, accessible spaces for temporary exhibitions and emerging artistic practices. Currently, local arts programming and major showcases are dispersed across peripheral, poorly integrated venues, such as the Orange Hall at the TU Delft Faculty of Architecture or the distant southern warehouse housing Theo Jansen's famous Strandbeesten kinetic sculptures.

By pulling these diverse cultural programs directly into the city center, the Theatre of the Future establishes a highly visible platform for contemporary art. When not hosting short-term exhibitions, this large, flexible first floor volume functions dynamically to support everyday civic needs, converting easily into student study zones during university exam periods, a pop-up independent cinema, or community workshops. The addition of a Black Box Theatre further strengthens this vision by providing an experimental and adaptable environment for diverse forms of art and performance. Such a space encourages unconventional uses and aligns with contemporary cultural practices.

In this way, the Theatre becomes a continuously active and flexible environment that supports both cultural production and everyday urban life.

Design Concept

To integrate the new Theatre of Delft, the proposal replaces four storage and retail buildings, orienting the new venue along an east-west axis between Kruisstraat and Paradijspoort. Truck access constraints heavily dictate the internal layout. Municipal regulations require daily deliveries to enter exclusively from Kruisstraat on the eastern edge. Consequently, the loading dock and backstage areas are anchored to the east, naturally pushing the public facing front of house zones to the west. The auditorium sits in the middle forming a connecting core.

This functional division is reinforced through the material strategy. While the core auditorium, stage, and fly tower are constructed from heavy, solid materials to anchor the building in the city, the surrounding program utilizes light materials that appear to float alongside it. To maximize streetlevel openness, the underside of the auditorium is elevated, extending the foyer space underneath. The high volume requirements of the auditorium and fly tower are expressed through a large, stepped shed roof that slopes downward toward the street, taking on a diamond shape that results from the interior seating arrangement. The foyer acts as the primary civic connector, extending from the existing HEMA building to the southern edge of the site beneath existing housing. Because the lifted auditorium underside interfaces with two double-height volumes, the foyer height shifts dramatically from 12.5 meters to 3 meters, yielding a diverse sequence of spatial qualities. In summer, operable facades dissolve the boundary between interior and exterior, allowing the foyer to function as an extension of the public pedestrian zone. To further strengthen this idea, the pavement continues into the building.

In contrast to the new building's lighter aesthetic, the integrated HEMA building retains its solid, vertically articulated red-brick facade. Its raw interior, defined by a 4.2-meter ceiling height and 60 cm diameter concrete mushroom columns, provides an industrial backdrop well suited for temporary exhibitions and the new Black box Theatre.

Adjacent to the foyer, small shops are integrated into the facade, making the building highly active and communicative with the street. Directly above, a long, plant-lined seasonal terrace faces southwest along Paradijspoort, accessible from both the street and the inside of the building. The balcony includes windows looking into the foyer downstairs and fixed seating that invites visitors to rest. While these shops prevent daylight from entering the foyer, the first-floor facade utilizes translucent glazing to bring in light. At night, this translucent skin, along with the 9-meter-high Black Box Theatre rising above the HEMA roofline, glows like a vibrant lantern in the heart of Delft.

The Auditorium

Theatre de Veste aims to expand and improve its facilities. The brief calls for a new auditorium with 800 seats and a stage appropriately scaled to support this increase. The proposal offers a significant improvement, featuring a stage measuring 20 × 18 metres, along with two side stages of 11 × 20 metres and 6 × 20 metres. The proscenium will no longer be fixed, allowing flexibility with a minimum opening of 12 metres and a maximum of 15 metres.

The auditorium is designed as a single tier space with 23 rows, each one meter deep. The number of seats per row ranges from 12 to 35, forming an overall oval shape. Each row is arranged along a curve to ensure optimal sightlines. Dutch fire regulations for theatres allow up to 50 seats per row, provided there is at least 47 cm of clearance between the back of one seat and the folded seat behind. The seats are 55 to 59 cm wide, ensuring comfort during performances.

The auditorium is envisioned as one unified space, where everyone gathers under a single dome, reinforcing a sense of community. To create a intimate atmosphere, the interior will be clad in treated shiny, warm timber, while the technical ceiling will be completely concealed. Each step will have a wooden finish to emphasize the feeling of unity. The seats will be upholstered in a calm, dark green fabric, enhancing the overall sense of comfort and cohesion.

To enhance the sense of everyone sharing the same space, access to the auditorium is intentionally designed to be narrow. All spectators ascend together via a main ramp to reach the stage level, where the wheelchair accessible seating is located. From there, the audience arrives at a staircase 1.5 metres wide, which follows the oval shape of the auditorium and subtly reveals what lies beyond.

The staircase is deliberately stark, with white painted walls and ceiling, creating a neutral transition space. From this point, each row is directly accessible. The staircase and the auditorium interior are separated by deep, narrow walls. Each pair of walls forms a corridor, clad in wood that hints at the warm materiality of the auditorium beyond. Doors are seamlessly integrated within these walls. Upon reaching their row, spectators pass through two walls, each 90 cm deep, and emerge into a large, open space. This space feels warm, calm, and unified, defined by a single material and animated by the presence of the audience.

Once the performance is about to begin, the doors walls close simultaneously, marking a clear transition into the performance.

The auditorium ceiling reflects the shape of the roof, connecting the interior and the exterior of the building. The interior of the auditorium has strong lines that are defined by the walls and the technical ceiling giving the impression of a continuous proscenium.

*„Not a building but a town, where you find everything – lunch, great
art, a library, great music“*

Renzo Piano

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Apendix

DISCLAIMER!

All drawings are drafts and will be reworked for the A3 Presentation.

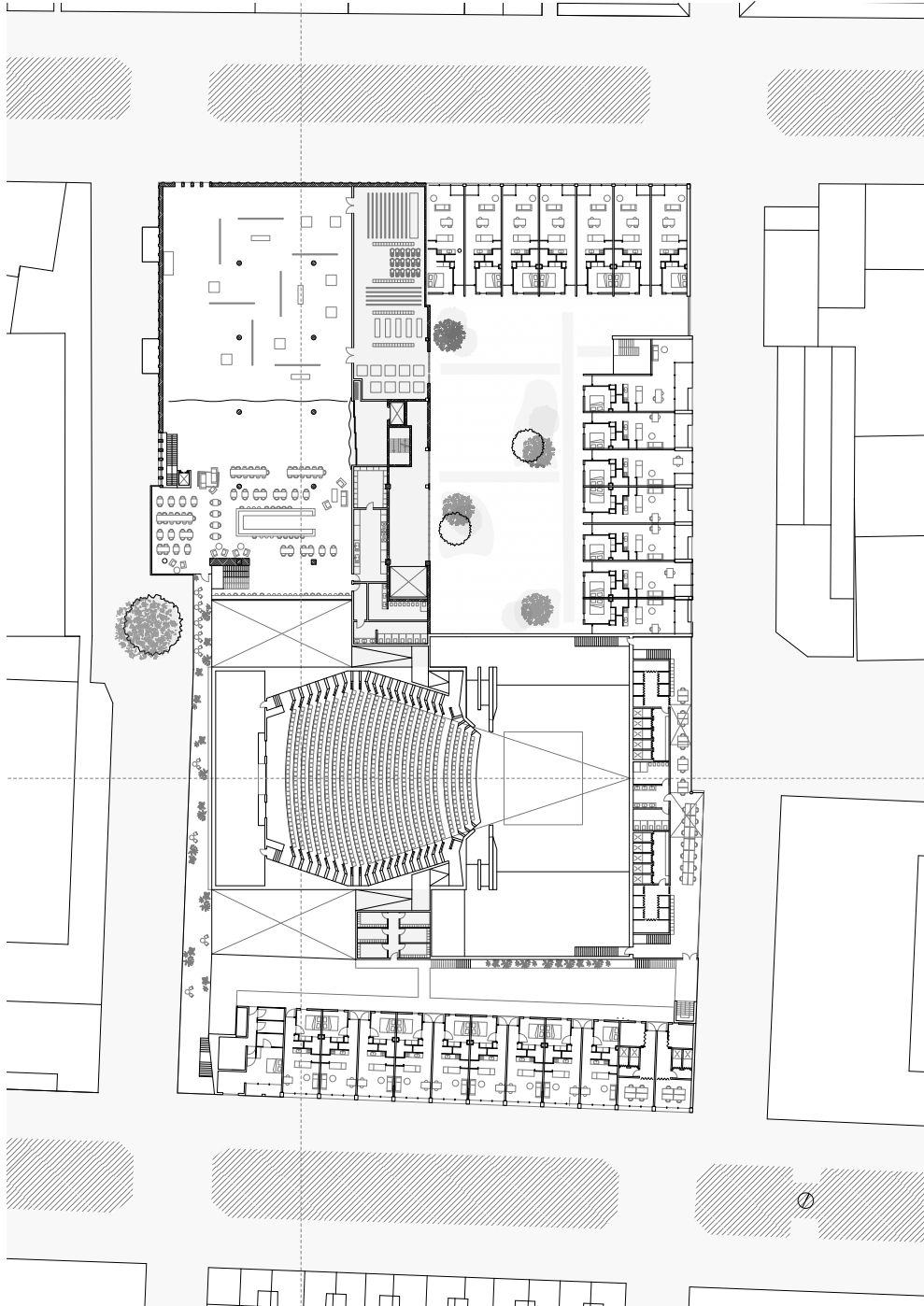
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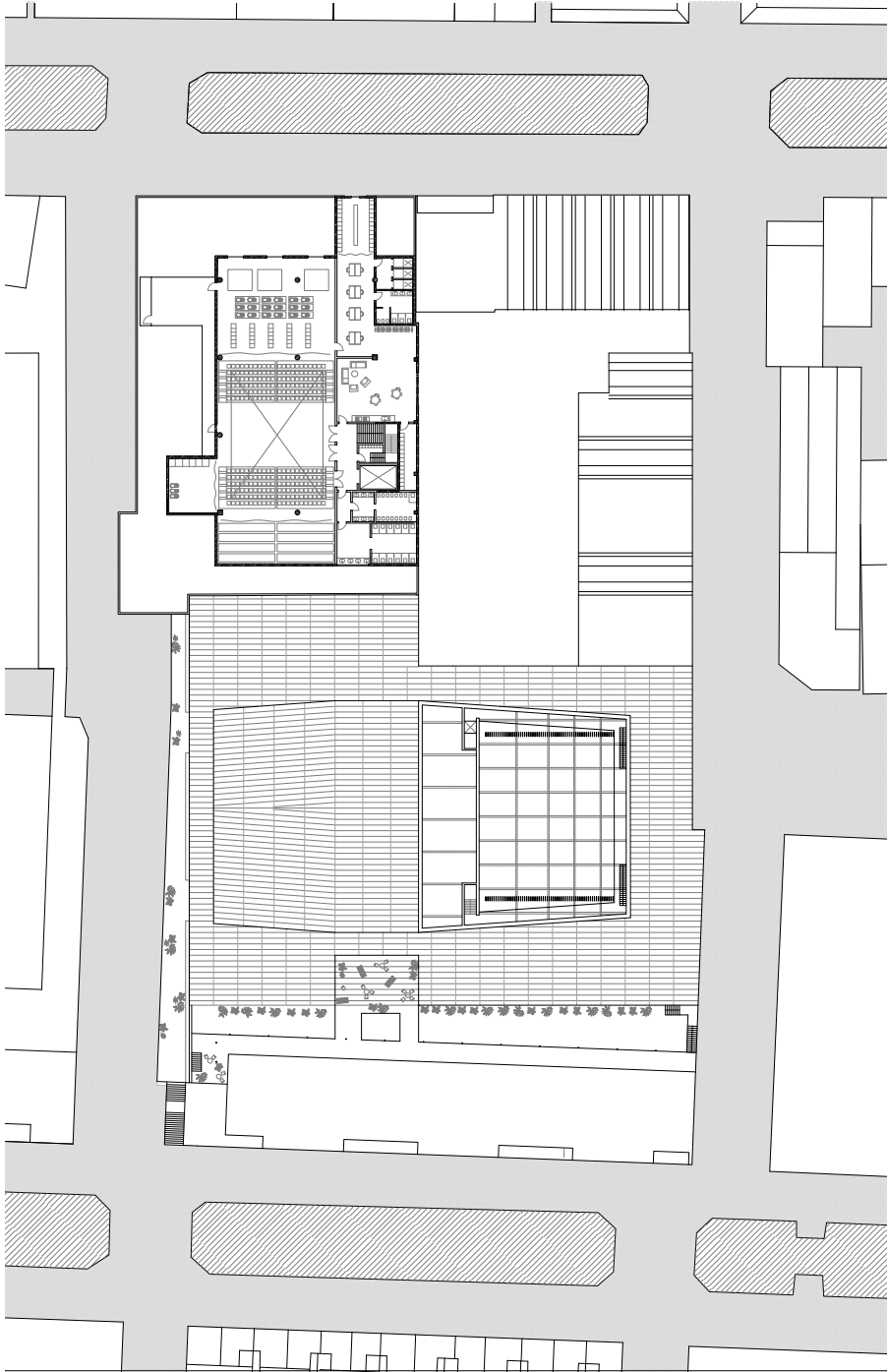
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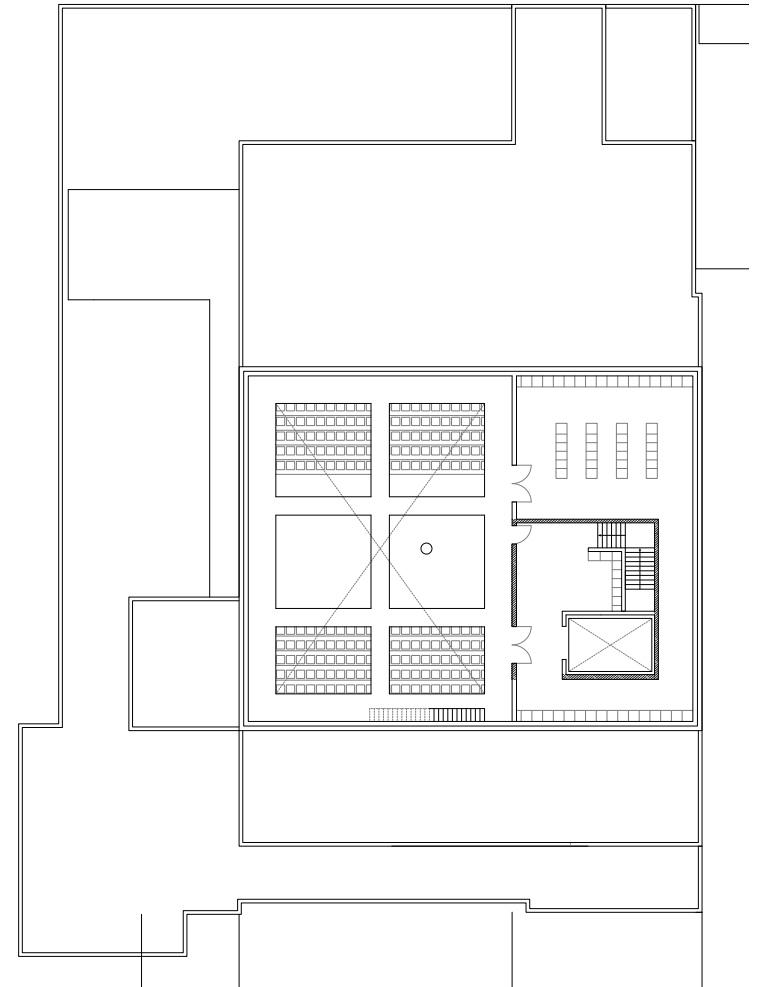
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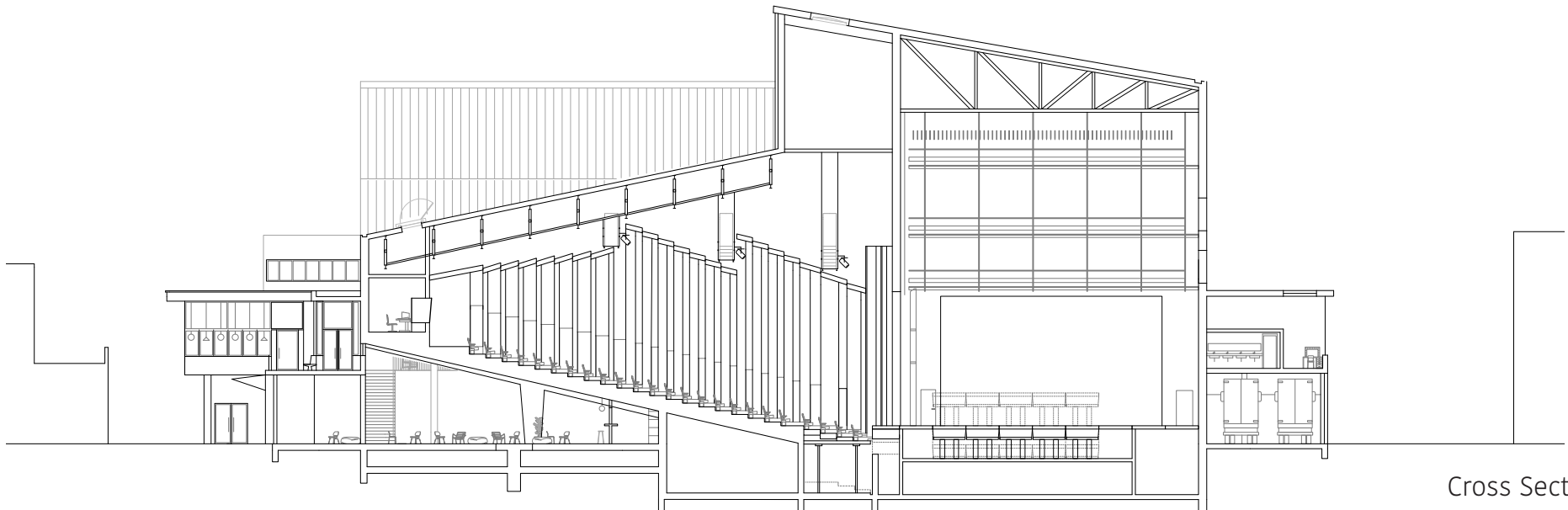
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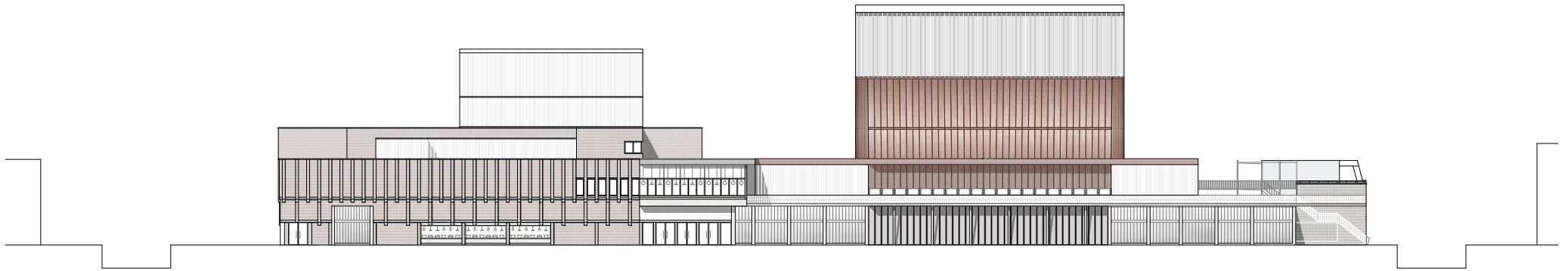
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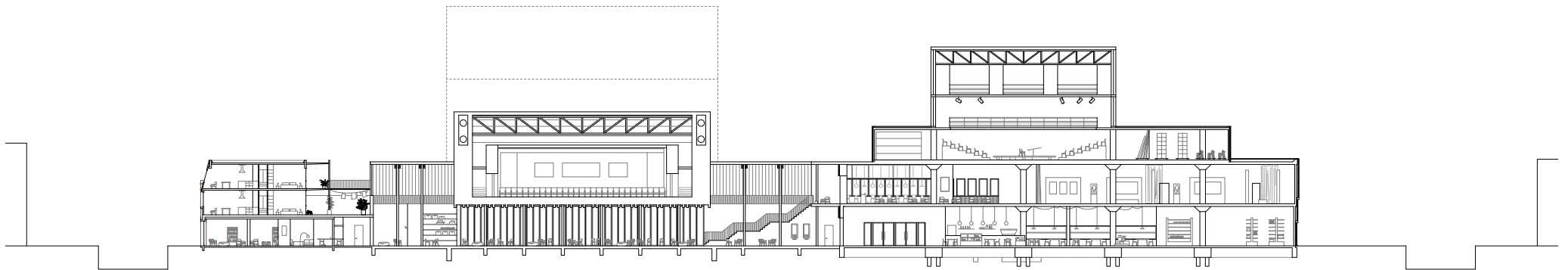
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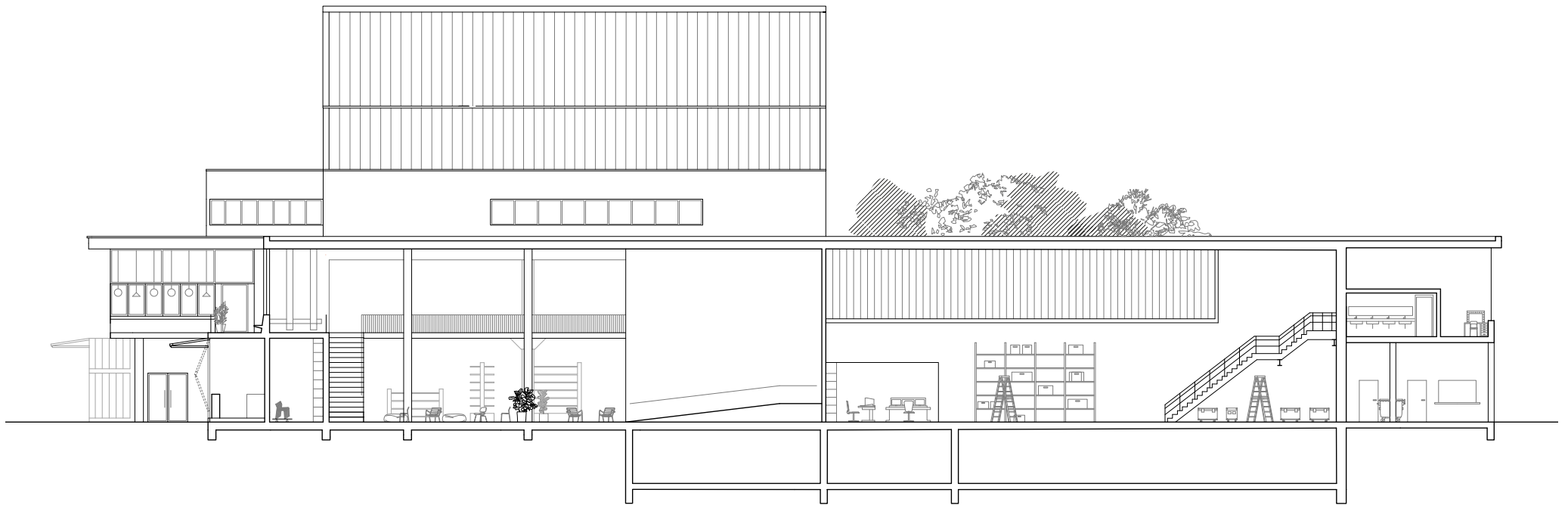
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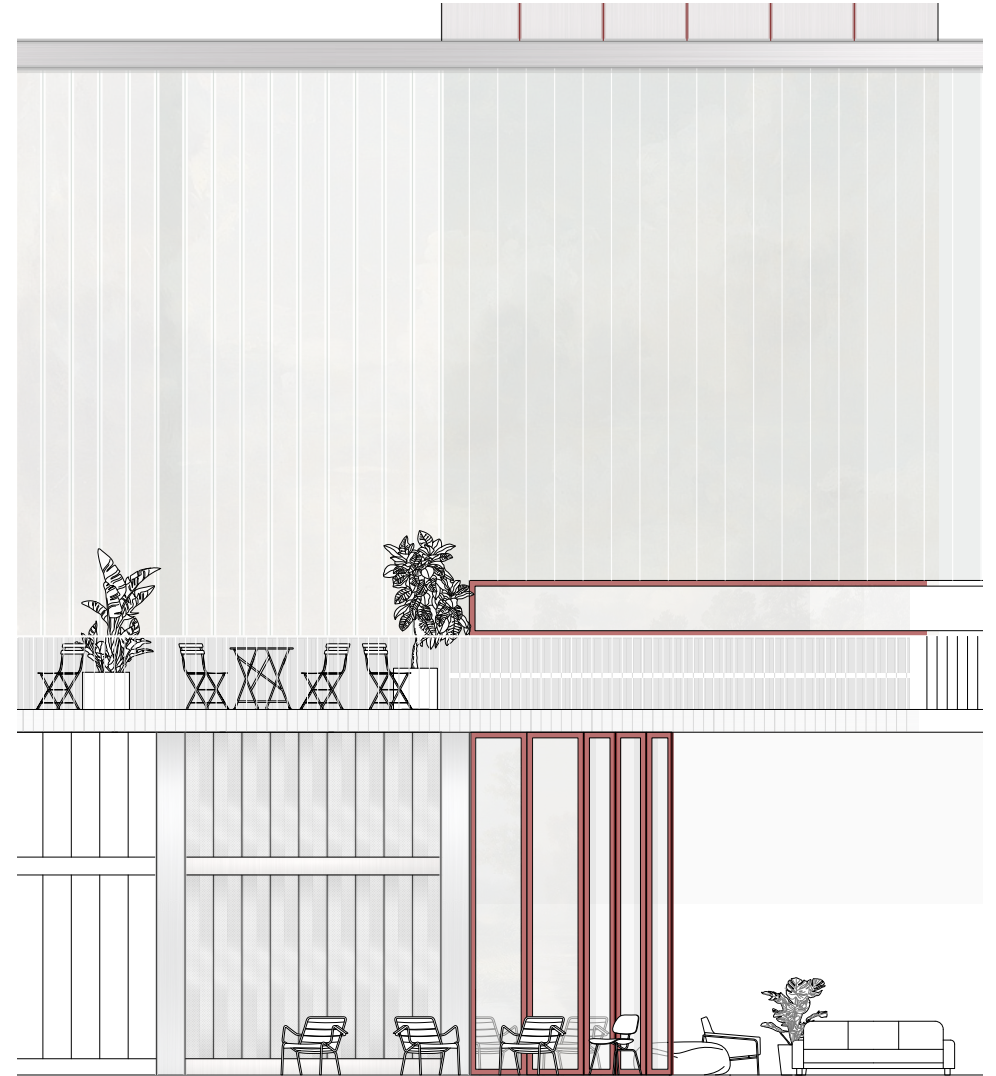
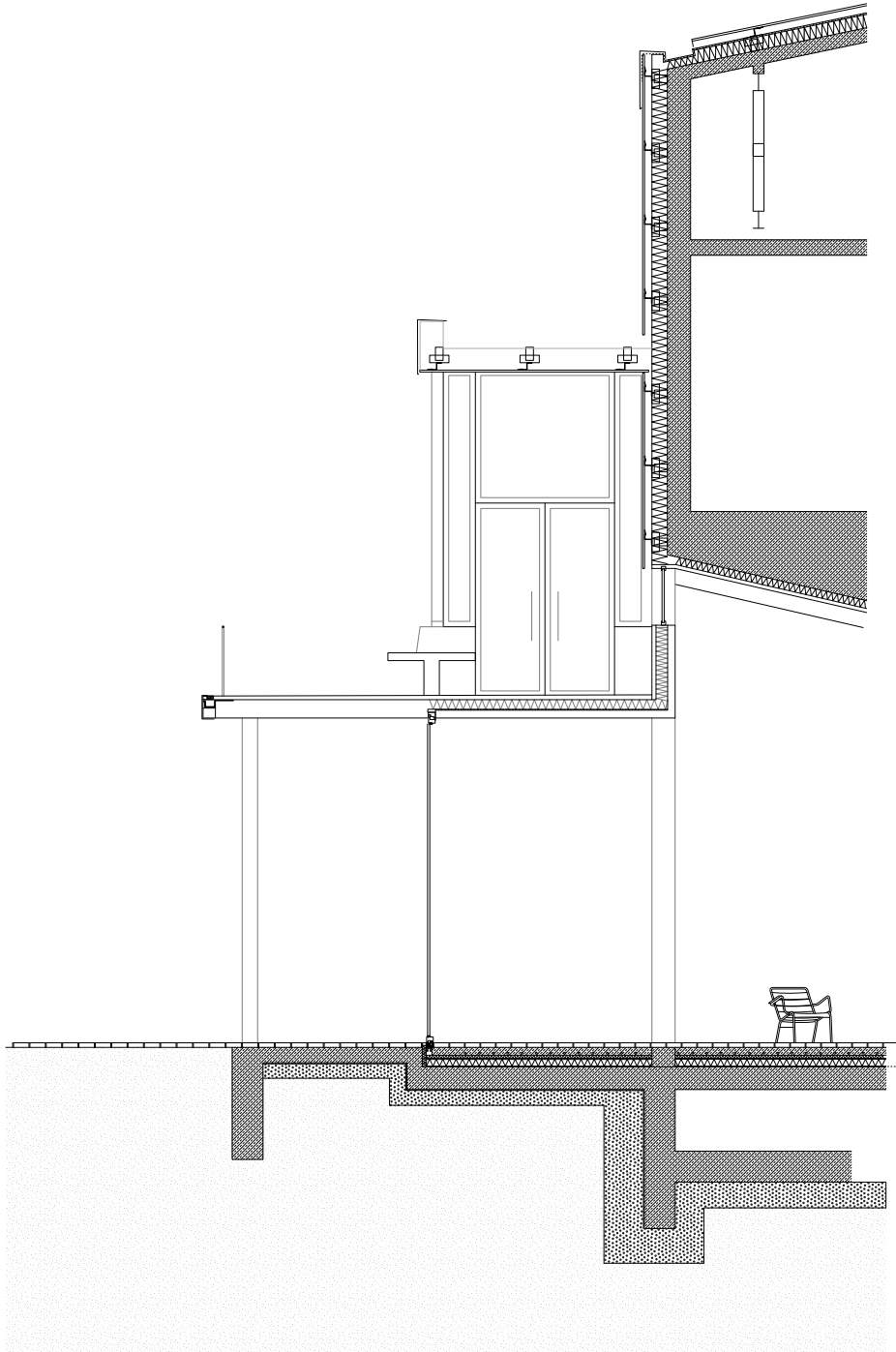
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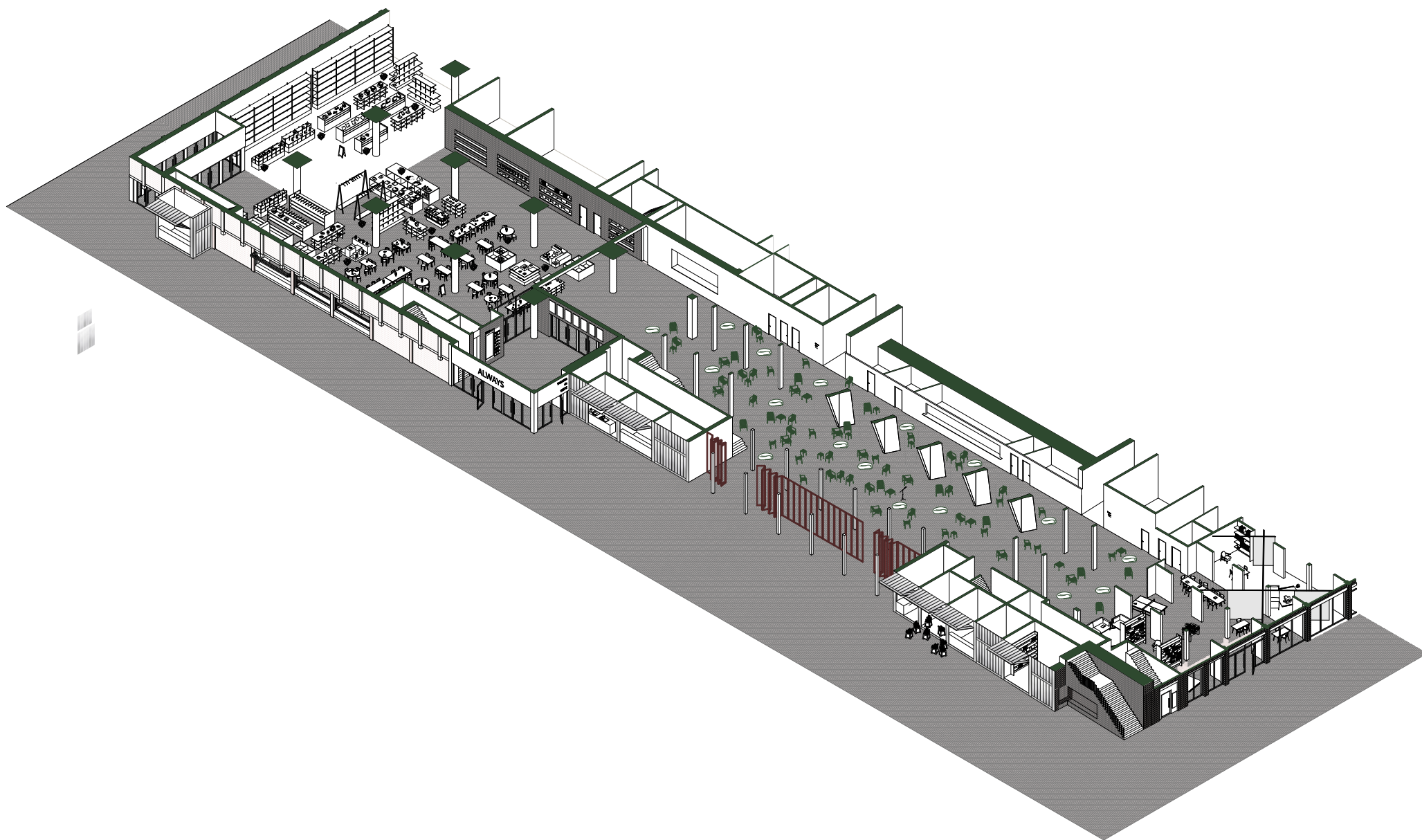
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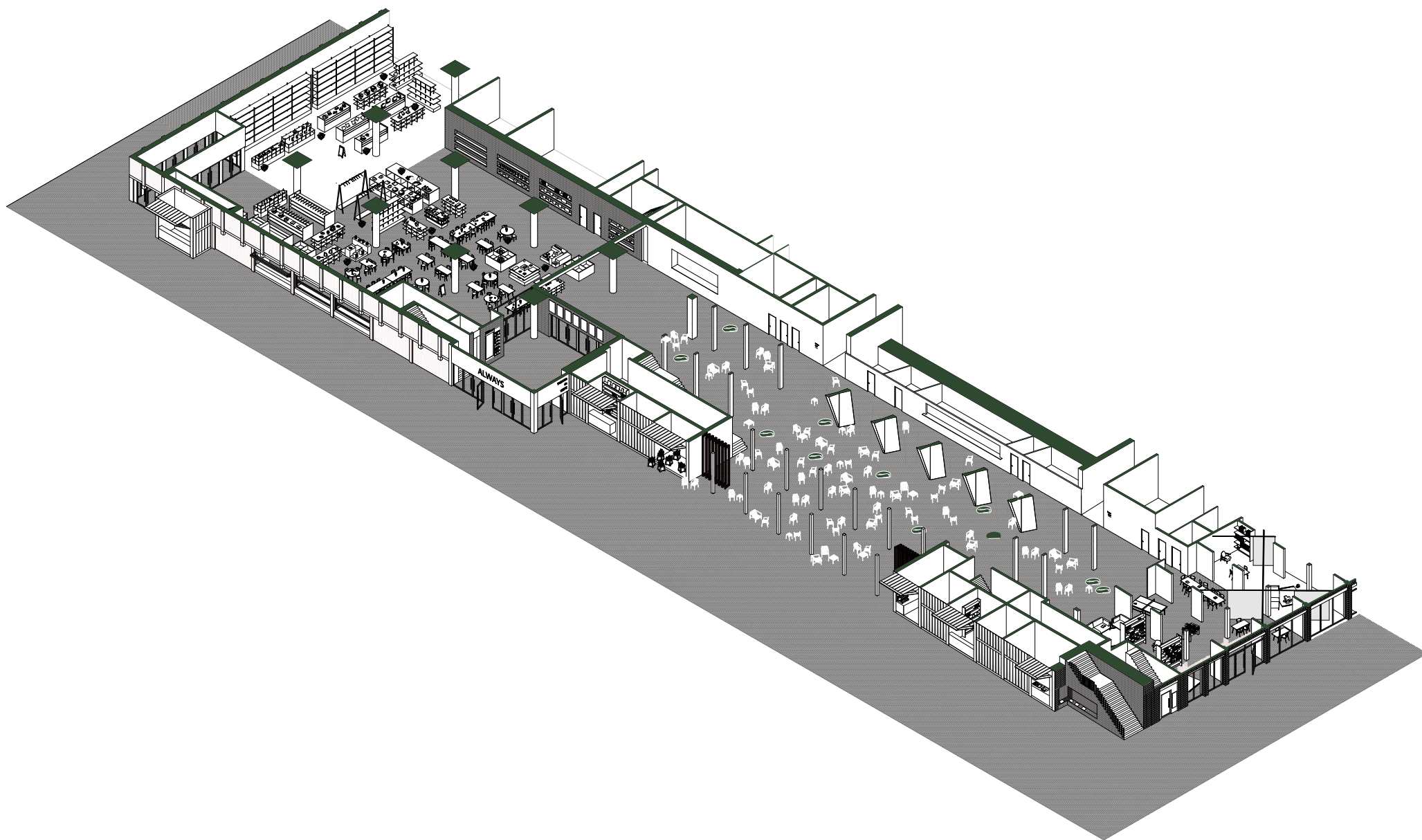


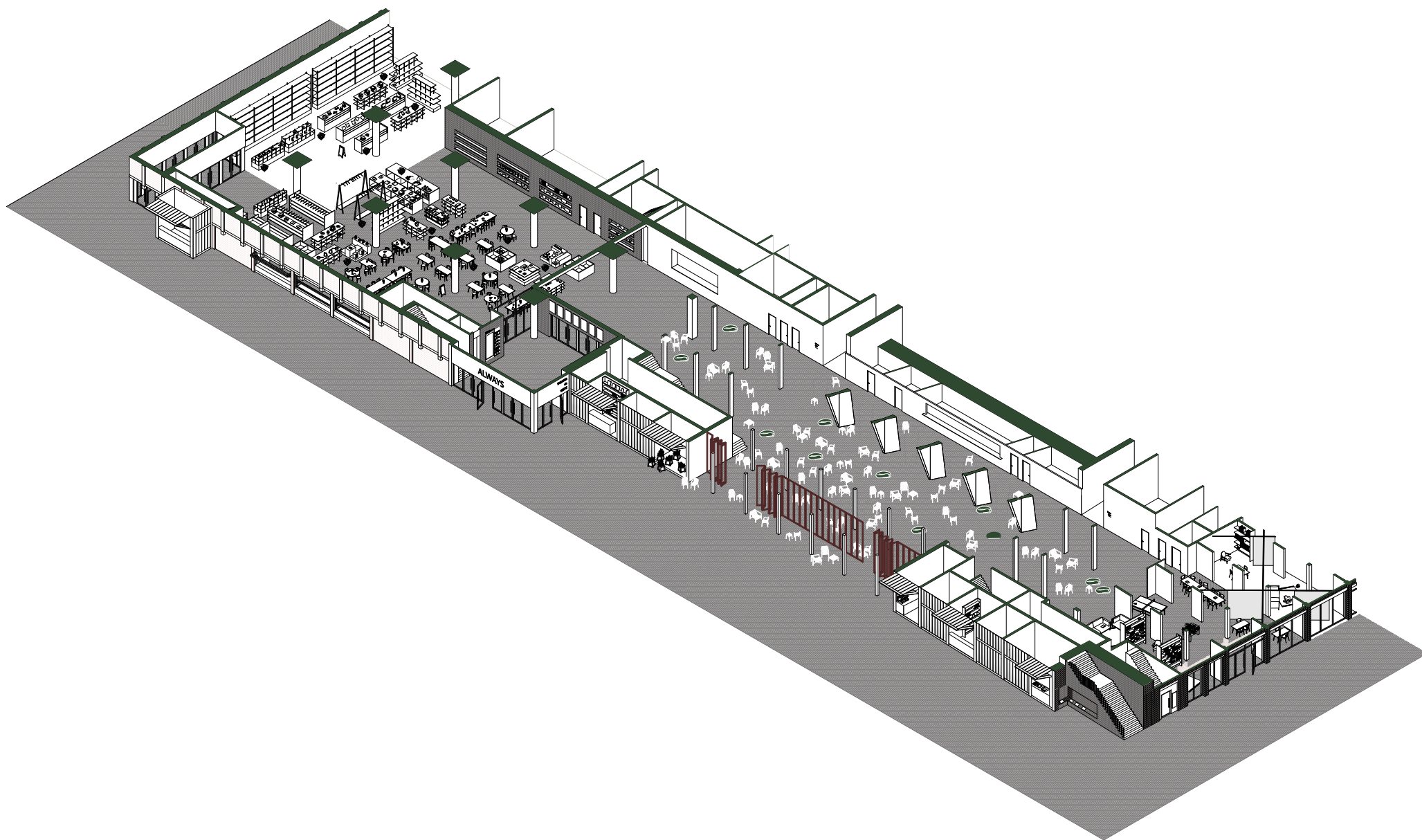
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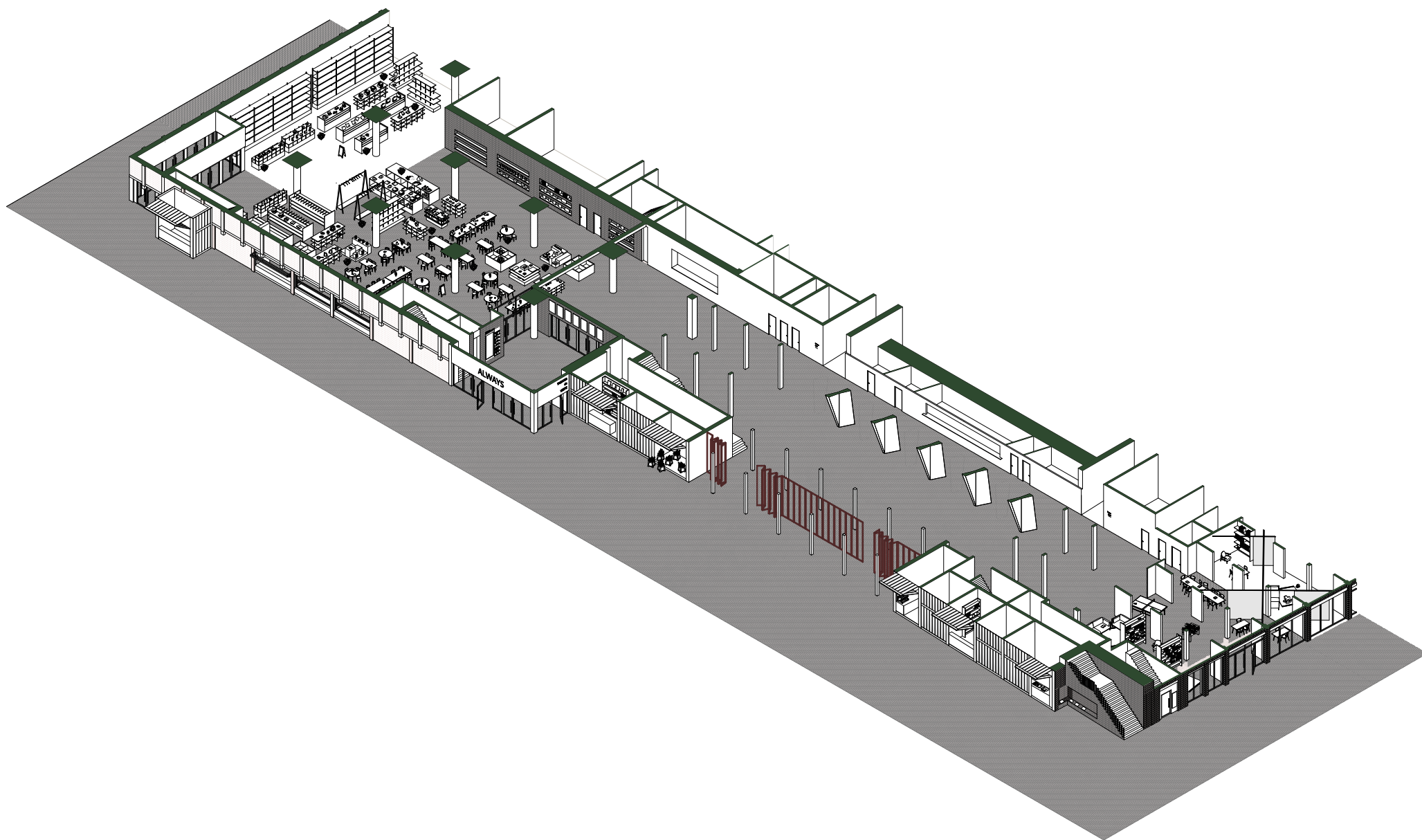


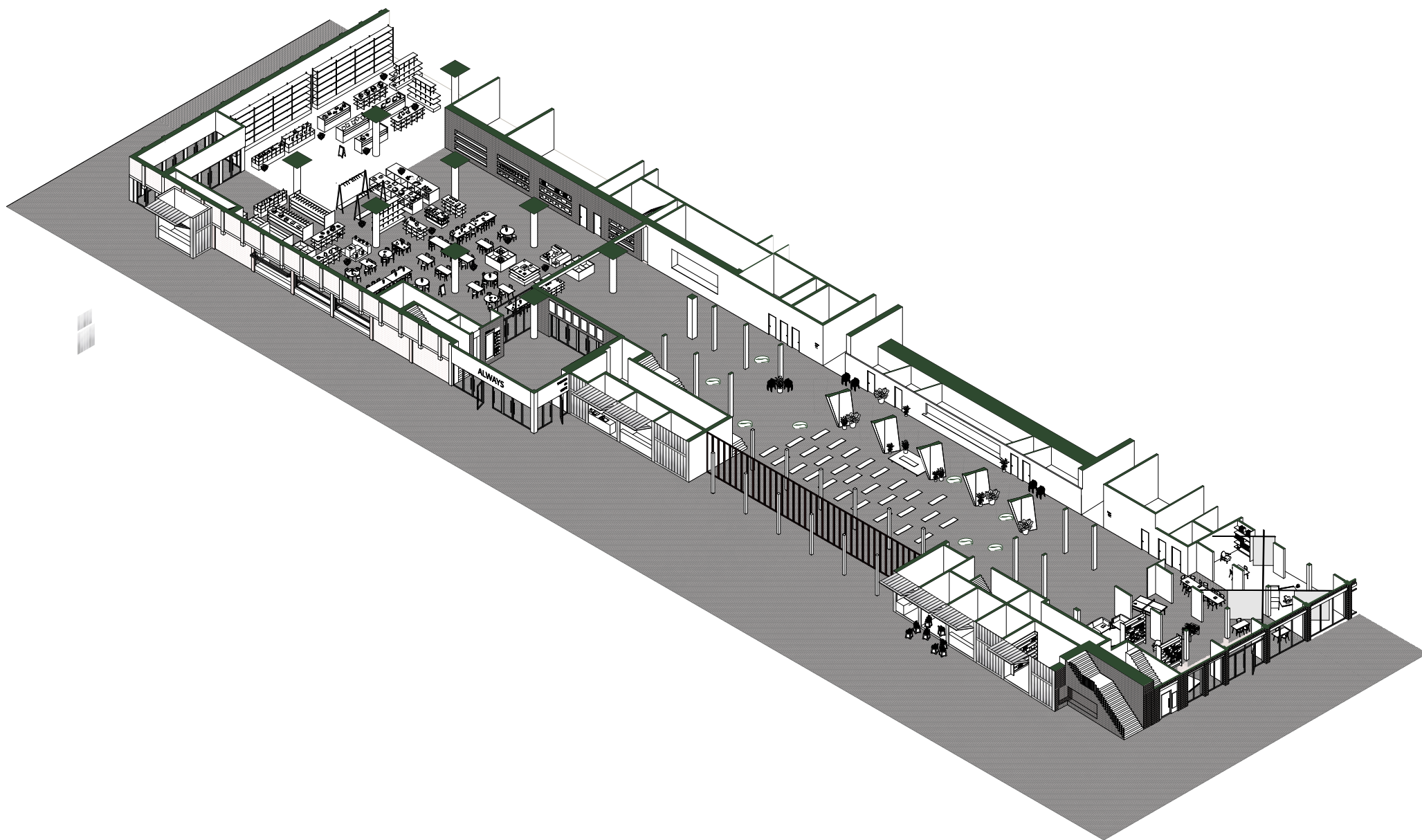
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DISCLAIMER!

This Journal is a draft and will be reworked for the A3 Presentation.

The official Journal will be provided during the A3 Presentation.

City Stage

A New Theater For Delft

*whoever
comes,
can stay*

Eva Lücking

Project Journal

Interiors Buildings Cities

The Brief

The context and history

Between city and stage

Setting the scene

A performative architecture

THE BRIEF

A New Theatre for Delft

Delft is a Dutch city of approximately 110,000 inhabitants, located in the western part of the Netherlands. It is best known for its renowned technical university and its iconic Delft Blue porcelain. The historic city centre is relatively small yet lively, centred around a main square with the Nieuwe Kerk and a high density of monumental buildings. Like most Dutch cities, Delft is strongly oriented around cycling, although the compact city centre can easily be explored on foot.

One of Delft's most distinctive qualities is its proximity to two of the Netherlands' largest cities: The Hague and Rotterdam. Both cities can be reached within a 15 minute train ride and offer a wide range of cultural activities, institutions, and public facilities. Delft itself, however, lacks this level of cultural diversity. Aside from the university and the public library, the city has few large public buildings that can accommodate its growing population. Most buildings are privately owned and offer limited public space, a consequence of the city's fine grained urban fabric. Beyond the university and the library, the next significant public institution in Delft is the theatre.

Since its construction in 1996, the theatre known as Theatre de Veste has become too small for a city of 110,000 inhabitants. The City of Delft therefore envisions a new theatre that not only replaces the existing Theatre de Veste, but also engages more deeply with its citizens and society. The current theatre, located on the southern edge of the historic city centre, forms part of a cultural cluster together with a cinema and the library. It contains a single auditorium with a capacity of 500 seats arranged across two balconies, and a stage measuring 10 × 15 metres with a fixed proscenium opening of 12 metres.

The new theatre is conceived as a significant expansion of this programme. It will include a main auditorium with approximately 800 seats, as well as a flexible Black Box Theatre designed to accommodate more experimental and diverse performances. At present, Theatre de Veste primarily functions as a receiving venue, mainly hosting music and comedy productions.

However, the building itself is in poor condition and can no longer be realistically expanded. The current stage dimensions and backstage facilities limit the types of productions the theatre is able to accommodate.

As a result, several theatre companies are either unwilling or unable to perform in Delft due to these spatial and technical constraints. In addition, the theatre's heating system is outdated and expensive to operate. During the summer months, the cooling system is insufficient, forcing the theatre to suspend performances because the indoor climate becomes unsuitable for audiences and performers alike. These conditions make clear that the existing theatre must be replaced by a modern building of an appropriate scale and technical standard. Besides the technical requirement the theatre of the future wishes to become more prominent in the city of delft.

It is envisioned as more than just a performance venue. It should become a place where audiences can engage in dialogue about culture and society; where theatre intersects with other art forms; and where people from all backgrounds feel welcome and can find meaning. Performances should be able to take place throughout the building, creating a dynamic environment that is simultaneously festive and everyday, serious and playful.

The Brief proposed four sites to choose from in the Zuidpoort area of Delft. The chosen site for the new theatre is located along a pedestrian zone in the centre of Delft. It sits within a lively urban setting, surrounded by busy streets lined with small retail shops on the ground floor and residential units above. The site forms an urban Block containing eight buildings. On the northern corner of the site stands a HEMA department store, built and opened in 1972. Within the context of Delft's historic centre, it is a relatively large scale building. Additionally, the urban block contains three similarly designed buildings, each with retail spaces at street level and one or two storeys of privately owned housing above.

To the south of the HEMA building, a tall and slender structure marks the corner of the block and houses two fashion retailers. Architecturally, this area differs noticeably from Delft's historic centre. Instead of typical dutch narrow townhouses with pitched roofs, the urban fabric here is defined by longer and wider buildings with flat roofs. Despite this contrast in form, the materiality helps maintain a visual continuity with the surrounding historic city.

This part of Delft reflects a particular moment in the city's urban development. The buildings were constructed following public protests against a proposed four-lane highway that would have cut through the historic centre.

THEATRE AND SOCIETY

Theatre's impact on Society Through Time

Traditionally, theatre has been understood as a reflection of reality, offering audiences the pleasure of recognition. Dramatic theatre, with its emphasis on individual actions and conflicts, allows audiences to identify emotionally with characters and plotlines. While this can be deeply engaging, it often obscures the broader social, political, and economic structures that shape contemporary life. In classical theatre, audiences often experience emotional release and empathy, yet they are rarely encouraged to critically analyze the society that produces such narratives.

Theatre theorists like Bertolt Brecht proposed a radical rethinking of theatre's purpose, during the twentieth century. Brecht argued that theatre should not simply entertain or evoke passive emotion but should stimulate critical reflection and raise awareness of societal structures. Through his Epic Theatre, Brecht employed techniques such as the alienation effect, direct address to the audience, narrative interruptions, and visible stagecraft to prevent complete emotional immersion. By encouraging audiences to observe social, political, and economic realities with a critical eye, Brecht aimed to transform theatre into a vehicle for social and political education, empowering spectators to question inequality, injustice, and the systems that regulate their lives.

Complementing this critical approach, Peter Brook, an English theatre and film director, emphasized theatre as a living, immediate experience, focusing on the power of presence and interaction. In his work, *The Empty Space*, Brook identified four types of theatre: Dead, Holy, Rough, and Immediate. He categorizes them according to vitality, engagement, and connection with the audience. Brook's "Immediate Theatre" highlights the importance of direct, authentic engagement between performers and spectators. Minimal reliance on elaborate sets or props allows actors and audiences to inhabit the same space fully, creating a shared, dynamic experience. While Brecht prioritizes critical detachment, Brook prioritizes emotional and sensory involvement, showing that theatre can equally educate, move, and immerse through vitality and authenticity.

These theoretical legacies foster much of postdramatic theatre today, which often prioritizes presence, situation, and event over linear narrative. Contemporary theatre frequently blurs the boundaries between art and reality, and between performers and spectators. Audience members may become participants, and performances may take place outside traditional theatre spaces, such as urban environments, public squares, or private homes. By doing so, theatre highlights its communal and interactive nature, emphasizing the shared experience of those present. This contemporary approach situates theatre as both representation and interaction, offering a space to explore social and political issues experientially, in real time, and in ways that challenge conventional storytelling. Importantly, contemporary theatre positions itself not merely as an aesthetic activity but as a social practice. It engages both intellectual and sensory perception, allowing audiences to experience stories, emotions, and perspectives in a direct and embodied way. Theatres live, shared situations allow viewers to either identify with or distance themselves from what they see on stage, fostering critical thinking, empathy, and the ability to form and articulate opinions. These skills are essential not only in cultural contexts but also in democratic societies. Theatre further supports language development, communication skills, and cultural literacy. By engaging with complex texts, narratives, and performances, audiences improve their understanding of language and meaning, connect with literary traditions, and reflect on their own lives in relation to others.

However, despite these strengths, theatre continues to face significant barriers. One of the most prominent issues is its lack of accessibility and inclusivity. Many people perceive theatre as elitist, formal, or intimidating. Social conventions such as expectations about dress codes or behaviour can create uncertainty, particularly among younger audiences or those without prior exposure. Additionally, economic barriers, such as ticket prices, further limit access for lower-income groups.

Another challenge is the competition with other forms of entertainment, such as film, streaming services, and digital media. Younger audiences, in particular, tend to prefer more easily accessible and familiar formats. As a result, theatre visits are often not part of their regular leisure activities.

Surveys have shown that many young people simply choose alternatives like cinema or television, or feel that theatre does not speak to their interests or experiences.

Furthermore, theatre audiences often lack social and cultural diversity.

Despite efforts to broaden participation, many institutions still struggle to attract people from different socio-economic backgrounds, as well as migrants or other underrepresented groups. This raises questions about whose stories are being told and who feels addressed by them.

In conclusion, theatre remains an essential cultural institution with a strong educational and social function. It fosters creativity, reflection, and dialogue, and has the potential to contribute meaningfully to individual and collective development. At the same time, it must confront ongoing challenges related to accessibility, perception, and changing audience habits. Addressing these issues is crucial if theatre is to remain relevant and inclusive in contemporary society.

From Bertolt Brecht's socially conscious Epic Theatre to Peter Brook's emphasis on immediacy and human presence, theatre has evolved to serve many functions: a mirror of society, a forum for public dialogue, a shared communal experience, and a tool for reflection. Its ability to foster empathy, encourage critical thinking, and stimulate meaningful conversations demonstrates that theatre is far more than a form of entertainment. It remains a living and socially relevant practice that enriches both cultural and civic life.

In this context, Theatre de Veste appears to face a significant challenge in its relationship with the local community. The building remains closed throughout the day and opens only shortly before performances begin. According to the theatre's management, limited financial resources make it impossible to keep the venue open during daytime hours for community activities or even to offer visitors the opportunity to meet, work, or enjoy a coffee in the foyer. As a result, the theatre functions primarily as a performance venue rather than as an active civic and cultural hub, limiting its potential to engage with the wider community beyond scheduled productions. Consequently, the theatre's accessibility extends beyond physical access and raises questions about social and cultural accessibility.

By remaining closed for most of the day and only opening for ticketed events, the venue risks reinforcing the perception that theatre is reserved for those who are already familiar with its conventions and social norms. This closed off model can create barriers for individuals who may not traditionally engage with theatre, reducing opportunities for spontaneous encounters, informal participation, and broader community involvement. As a result, the theatre becomes less accessible as a public cultural space and more exclusive to established audiences, limiting its capacity to serve as an inclusive gathering place for the diverse communities it seeks to represent.

CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

Scenography as a Tool for Shaping Experience

Theatre, in the past, relied on clear structures: a defined stage, a proscenium, a seated audience, and a distinction between performers and spectators. However, the understanding of how performance and scenography has shifted. Contemporary practices increasingly blur these boundaries, even though the traditional theater is still popular and used worldwide. Modern Performances are no longer confined to a specific location or format. Instead, it can take place in streets, abandoned buildings, public squares, or even digital environments. In these contexts, the audience is not always passive. They may move through spaces, interact with elements, or become part of the performance itself. This transformation challenges the conventional idea of theatre as something watched from a distance and replaces it with an experience that is immersive and participatory. When performances move beyond traditional stages, the environment itself becomes meaningful. A city street, for example, is no longer just a backdrop but an active component that shapes the event. The everyday world becomes theatrical, and performance becomes something embedded in real life rather than separate from it. As a result, scenography is no longer about decorating a stage but about organizing how people encounter and interpret a space.

Scenography has become a tool, system, and process. Rather than being limited to physical design elements like sets or props, scenography now refers to the way environments are structured to produce meaning and guide perception. It can involve visual, spatial, auditory, and even sensory elements working together to create an experience. In this expanded sense, scenography becomes a way of thinking. It helps explain how spaces influence behavior, emotions, and interpretation. A performance guides an audience's attention, similarly, festivals or political events use scenographic strategies to shape collective experience and communicate ideas. Ultimately, these developments position scenography at the center of contemporary cultural practice. It is no longer just supportive or decorative but generative. It creates meaning rather than simply illustrating it.

By shaping how people move through and perceive environments, scenography plays a crucial role in defining how experiences are constructed and understood in the modern world.

Juliet Rufford, a British researcher, emphasizes the interconnection between spatial design and performative experience.

Architecture is understood as inherently performative, in that it shapes movement, directs attention, and influences how individuals interact with one another and with their surroundings. From this perspective, the built environment can be seen as staging forms of social behaviour, much like theatre does.

While acknowledging the creative potential of interdisciplinary approaches between theatre and architecture, she also highlights how performative and scenographic strategies have been absorbed into contemporary economic and urban systems. In particular, the increasing use of theatrical techniques, such as spectacle, immersion, and participation, in the design of commercial and urban spaces. These strategies, are often employed to enhance consumer engagement and to transform environments into marketable experiences. As a result, cities and buildings can function as what Rufford describes as “brandscares,” where spatial design serves the interests of capital, tourism, and urban regeneration.

The incorporation of performance into architecture and urban design does not necessarily produce more meaningful or socially engaged experiences. Instead, it can contribute to processes of commodification, in which space is valued primarily for its economic potential. In this sense, the blurring of boundaries between theatre, architecture, and everyday life is not inherently progressive, but must be understood within broader political and economic frameworks.

At the same time, Rufford does not reject the intersection of theatre and architecture outright. Performance architecture projects where buildings are treated as sites of live experimentation, as well as collaborative approaches to theatre architecture that foreground process, participation, and adaptability use the tools of performance and scenography not to produce spectacle or commercial value, but to question and reconfigure existing social and spatial relations.

In such cases, spatial design becomes a means of engaging with social, political, and cultural issues, rather than simply presenting an aesthetic experience. It is a complex and multifaceted concept within contemporary performance and spatial design. It functions as a process that structures sensory and spatial experience, extending across disciplinary boundaries and into everyday life. At the same time, it raises critical questions about the role of design in shaping social relations and about the ways in which spatial practices can either reinforce or challenge existing structures. These developments suggest that the theatre of the future should no longer be conceived as a building organized around a single performance hall. Instead, it should function as a performative environment in which the entire building can become a stage. Its spatial structure should provide a variety of adaptable and inhabitable spaces that artists can appropriate, transform, and activate in different ways. Corridors, foyers, staircases, outdoor areas, and transitional spaces can all become sites of performance, interaction, and experimentation.

Such an approach aligns with contemporary understandings of theatre and scenography, where performance is no longer confined to a designated stage and spectators are encouraged to engage more actively with their surroundings. By extending performative potential throughout the building, theatre architecture can support immersive, participatory, and site responsive practices that challenge traditional distinctions between audience and performer. Rather than serving merely as a container for cultural events, the theatre itself becomes an active participant in the creation of meaning. In this way, the theatre of the future can move beyond the production of spectacle and instead foster new forms of social engagement, spatial exploration, and collective experience.

THEATRE IN CRISIS

Understanding Dutch Theatre Culture

The Dutch theatre sector has faced sustained pressure over the past decades, shaped by structural funding cuts, shifting cultural policies, and changing audience dynamics. These factors have made it increasingly difficult for theatres not only to survive, but also to innovate and develop for the future. This ongoing pressure has led to a gradual transformation of the sector's organisational and artistic priorities.

A major challenge lies in the reduction and restructuring of public funding. Since the early 2010s, government austerity measures have significantly decreased subsidies for the arts. These cuts have forced many theatres to operate with tighter budgets, reducing their capacity to take artistic risks, invest in new productions, or maintain long-term development strategies. Instead, institutions are often pushed toward short-term financial sustainability, prioritising ticket sales and efficiency over experimentation and cultural diversity.

At the same time, theatres are expected to broaden their social and cultural role. Audiences today have access to an unprecedented range of entertainment options, including streaming platforms, social media, festivals, and other live events which altered how people spend their leisure time. Cultural consumption has become more individualised, whereas theatre traditionally requires a fixed time, place, and a certain level of commitment. Unlike in the past, theatre is no longer a default or habitual activity for many people, but rather one option among many competing forms of entertainment. As a result, theatres must work harder to position themselves as relevant and meaningful within everyday life.

This shift is particularly visible among younger generations, who are less likely to engage with traditional theatre formats. At the same time, audiences have become more selective and experience-oriented. They are less inclined to attend performances out of routine and more motivated by unique, high-quality, or socially relevant events. This increases the pressure on theatres to curate distinctive programmes and to continuously justify the value of each visit.

The fragmentation of audiences makes it harder to maintain a stable and predictable visitor base. Instead of serving a relatively consistent public, theatres must now address multiple niche audiences with different expectations and cultural backgrounds. This complicates programming decisions and can create tensions between accessibility and artistic identity.

Today, theatres need to build long-term relationships with audiences, creating educational programmes, collaborating with local organisations, and experimenting with new formats that bridge the gap between performance and everyday life. However, these efforts require time, expertise, and financial resources which are limited due to funding constraints.

The pressure to demonstrate relevance can lead to safer programming choices, limiting innovation and making it harder for theatres to distinguish themselves artistically.

Funding cuts also affect the internal structure of theatre organisations. Staff reductions, increased workloads, and reliance on freelance labour have become common in the Netherlands. This precarisation weakens the sector's resilience and limits opportunities for emerging artists. Long-term artistic development, which depends on stability and continuity, becomes harder to sustain under these conditions.

Producing theatres are particularly vulnerable in this context. Unlike receiving houses, which primarily host touring productions, producing theatres are responsible for creating new work. This involves higher costs, including rehearsal spaces, technical staff, artistic teams, and longer production timelines. When funding decreases, these institutions are often forced to reduce the number of productions, scale down ambitions, or co-produce more frequently to share risks. This can limit artistic independence and experimentation.

Receiving houses, by contrast, operate with more flexibility. Their financial structure is less burdened by the high upfront costs associated with creation, such as rehearsals, artistic development, technical production, and long lead times. Instead, their expenses are more directly tied to programming and operations, allowing them to adjust more quickly to changing financial conditions or audience preferences. Their model is generally more resilient. This model enables receiving houses to curate programmes that respond

to demand, trends, or local interests with relative ease. They can select from a wide range of existing productions and assemble a diverse schedule without the longterm commitments required by producing institutions. However, they are still affected by funding cuts, particularly in terms of programming budgets and operational costs.

Dutch theatres face a complex set of challenges: reduced funding, increased societal expectations, changing audience behaviour, and organisational pressures. These factors collectively constrain their ability to innovate and grow. Producing theatres, due to their higher costs and creative responsibilities, are especially impacted, highlighting an imbalance within the sector that continues to shape its future.

THE GREAT GOOD PLACE

Ray Oldenburg, 1989

The following chapters frequently refer to the concept of the “third place,” which is central to this project. This idea was introduced by the American sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1932–2022) in his influential book *The Great Good Place*. In this work, Oldenburg created the term “third place” and defined it as a broad category of public environments that host regular, voluntary, informal, and enjoyable gatherings beyond the realms of home and work.

Oldenburg distinguishes between the “first place” (home) and the “second place” (work), positioning third places as essential settings that exist outside these primary spheres of daily life. In such spaces, individuals can set aside their responsibilities and concerns, and instead enjoy the presence, conversation, and company of others. Examples include cafes, bars, coffee shops, libraries, and community centres, as well as more informal venues such as taverns, general stores, or recreation halls. Through his work, Oldenburg demonstrates that these places have long been at the heart of public life, playing a vital role in supporting local democracy, social cohesion, and community vitality. These places either emerge organically over time shaped by the habits and routines of their users or can be intended „empty spaces“ designed to welcome people.

He characterises third places as neutral and inclusive environments that promote social equality by softening hierarchies between individuals. They are accessible, welcoming to strangers, and often shaped by a group of regular visitors who develop a sense of belonging and attachment to the space. Conversation is the primary activity, and the overall atmosphere is typically relaxed, playful, and informal. In this sense, third places function as a “home away from home,” offering psychological comfort and fostering a sense of community. Oldenburg also emphasises their broader social significance. Third places create opportunities for informal exchange and association, forming the foundation for civic engagement and collective life. They enable people to encounter one another across social, cultural, and economic differences, thereby strengthening the social fabric of a

community. Without such spaces, social life becomes more fragmented and increasingly privatised, often limited to the repetitive cycle between home and work. As a result, the presence or absence of such spaces can significantly influence the overall quality of urban life.

However, not all public spaces fulfil the qualities of a true third place.

Spaces such as train stations, while publicly accessible, are rarely inviting or conducive to lingering. Likewise, many conventional third places come with certain barriers: cafés and bars often require consumption, while libraries may restrict social interaction through rules such as silence.

These limitations can reduce accessibility, particularly for those with fewer financial resources. For this reason, third places are especially important for individuals in more vulnerable living conditions. Families in smaller homes may depend on shared spaces where children can play freely, while people living alone may seek environments that alleviate isolation. Those residing in poorly designed housing may look for alternative places that offer comfort and social interaction. In particular, people with lower incomes benefit from spaces where they are welcome without the expectation of spending money. Similarly, immigrants or newcomers may rely on such environments to build connections and develop a sense of belonging within a new cultural context. Oldenburg's work extends beyond theory. Trained in sociology, with degrees from Mankato State University and the University of Minnesota, he spent much of his career as a professor at the University of West Florida. His approach was notably grounded in observation and everyday life, often engaging directly with communities rather than remaining within academic settings. He also collaborated with urban planners, cities, and organisations worldwide, advocating for the creation of spaces that strengthen social interaction and human connection.

The position of a third place within the urban fabric strongly determines its impact. They are often situated along everyday routes, at key intersections, or within mixed-use areas where different social groups naturally intersect. Their success depends on accessibility, visibility, and permeability, allowing people to enter easily and appropriate the space in their own way. In this sense, they act as connective tissue within the city, linking private and public life while reinforcing a sense of local identity. When carefully integrated,

they can activate underused areas and contribute to a more vibrant and resilient urban environment. In architecture and urban design, the concept of the third place highlights the importance of creating environments that extend beyond their primary function. Designs should incorporate inclusive and socially embedded spaces that invite people to spend time there throughout the day, engage in conversation, and participate in cultural exchange. In this way, the building becomes part of everyday urban life, a place where culture, community, and social interaction intersect. Theaters have significant potential to incorporate third spaces into their programming. These buildings are often situated in prime locations within city centers and are publicly funded, making a strong case for their accessibility to a broad audience.

Across Europe, many public buildings, including theaters, have integrated third spaces into their programs. While some were intentionally designed to function as third places, others gradually evolved in this direction in order to remain accessible, relevant, and financially sustainable. The Theater Basel provides an important successful example, as it was not originally designed as a third space. Built in 1970, it initially fulfilled a conventional theatrical function. Like many theaters, it faced challenges such as reduced funding and declining visitor numbers. In response, it introduced a more open and accessible public program. Located in the city center between the town hall and the train station, the theater is directly connected to the Tinguely Fountain, which transforms the outdoor forecourt into a public space for art. The fountain was built between 1975 and 1977 on the site of the former city theater stage and was designed by the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely. Its ten kinetic figures, arranged like performers on a stage, continuously enact an ever-changing spectacle, blurring the line between sculpture and performance. In this way, theatricality extends beyond the building itself into the urban space, inviting passersby to engage with art in their everyday environment. The theater now opens its doors daily, offering a foyer with a bar, reading areas, children's spaces, and a large open zone that accommodates performances, discussions, and informal gatherings. This transformation has successfully increased both visitor numbers and revenue.

In close proximity to Delft, Amare in The Hague, by contrast, was designed from the outset as a multifunctional cultural hub and a contemporary “third space.” It houses multiple venues, including a dance theater, a concert hall, and a smaller multifunctional hall associated with a university. While it operates as a receiving house, it incorporates educational functions, with a music school occupying the upper floors for both children and higher education students, although these areas are not publicly accessible.

A defining feature of Amare is its foyer, which is conceived as an extension of the public realm. The foyer is long and positioned directly along a pedestrian zone, with a fully glazed facade that allows passersby to look inside, visually connecting the interior with the city. With entrances at both ends, it functions as a passage as well as a destination, reinforcing its role as an extension of the street. A large, multifunctional staircase serves not only as a circulation element but also as informal seating, enabling visitors to gather and observe performances taking place within the foyer itself. These performances can either be set against the backdrop of the city, or framed through the use of curtains. A ceiling-mounted lighting rig further supports this adaptability, allowing the space to shift between everyday use and staged events.

Adjacent to the main foyer is the “market square,” a more intimate and flexible area that supports a variety of informal and community oriented activities. This space can host flea markets, study areas, relaxation zones, children’s play areas, open mic sessions, as well as yoga and dance classes. the new theater for delft should aim to incorporate similar spaces in order to respond to its accessibility and engagement.

The City of Delft could benefit from a third space similar to the two described. One that feels relaxed and inviting, located in the heart of Delft, and accessible to everyone.

PEOPLES PALACE

Where Culture Belongs To Everyone

The concept of the “People’s Palace” originates in the nineteenth century as part of broader social reform movements in industrialising Europe, particularly in Britain. It emerged from a growing concern with urban poverty, limited access to education, and the need to provide cultural and recreational opportunities for the working classes. Rather than being a formalised theoretical framework attributed to a single author, the “People’s Palace” is best understood as a civic and architectural ideology. The idea that cultural institutions such as museums, libraries, and performance spaces should function as accessible, educational, and morally uplifting environments for all members of society.

One of the earliest and most significant examples of this concept is the People’s Palace in East London, opened in 1887 in the Mile End area. It was developed in response to the dense industrial population of the East End and was strongly influenced by Victorian philanthropic and reformist thinking. The institution combined education, entertainment, and social reform under one roof, offering lecture halls, exhibitions, a library, swimming baths, and spaces for music and public gatherings. Its founding vision was to provide “rational recreation,” a term used in the nineteenth century to describe activities that were both enjoyable and morally and intellectually beneficial. In this sense, the People’s Palace was not merely a building but a social project aimed at improving civic life and fostering self-improvement among the working classes.

The theoretical foundations of the People’s Palace can be linked to broader Victorian ideologies of progress, public morality, and education. Thinkers and reformers of the period believed that access to culture and knowledge could help reduce social inequality and promote social cohesion. Architecture played a central role in this ambition, as buildings were seen as instruments for shaping behaviour and guiding social development. The People’s Palace thus reflected a belief in the transformative power of space. Carefully designed environments could elevate individuals both intellectually and morally.

However, the concept was never without contradiction. While the People's Palace was intended as a democratic space, it was also shaped by paternalistic assumptions about the working class. Access to culture was often structured through institutional control, with clearly defined rules, educational agendas, and moral expectations. The building provided access, but within boundaries determined by reformers and civic authorities.

Over time, the idea of the People's Palace evolved beyond its Victorian origins. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it has been reinterpreted within architectural, cultural, and theoretical discourse as a model for civic accessibility and public space. Contemporary discussions often use the term more critically, questioning whether cultural institutions truly function as open and democratic spaces or whether they remain shaped by economic, institutional, and social barriers. In this expanded interpretation, the People's Palace becomes less a specific building type and more a conceptual framework for thinking about the relationship between architecture, culture, and society.

Today, the relevance of the People's Palace lies in its ability to frame ongoing debates about accessibility, public engagement, and the social role of cultural institutions. It raises important questions about who has access to cultural spaces, how often these spaces are open, and whether they function as active parts of everyday civic life or remain restricted to scheduled events. As such, the concept continues to inform contemporary architectural and scenographic thinking, particularly in discussions about how cultural buildings might become more integrated into the social fabric of the city. The idea of a "People's Palace" is supported by the concept of the "third place," which provides a useful framework for understanding how such a model can function in practice. A third place refers to informal public environments that exist beyond home and work, offering space for social interaction, community engagement, and shared experience. In this sense, the theatre of the future, as a cultural building funded through public taxation, should be accessible to everyone who contributes to it. In return, it should actively serve the public rather than remaining restricted to ticketed performances alone. By opening its doors more consistently, theatre can shift from being an exclusive cultural product to a more inclusive civic

space, where culture is not hidden behind a financial barrier but becomes part of everyday social life. The theatre should be capable of hosting several forms of art and engaging with diverse cultural expressions. It should provide space for cultural exchange and interaction. This is particularly relevant in the Netherlands, and in Delft specifically, where many international residents come to study or work. The city also has a large population of young people who may not be able to afford expensive events or who do not prioritise cultural activities in their daily lives. The theatre should therefore offer activities and spaces that attract people from all social classes and generations, to bring culture into their lives.

FINDING ITS PLACE

Exploring the four sites

siteplan 4 sites

The location for the new Theater de Veste was not predetermined. Instead, four different sites were offered for consideration within the Zuidpoort area of Delft. Each site has its own distinct character and spatial qualities. The first potential site was Gasthuisplaats, located in the western part of Zuidpoort. The site contains a former hospital building, while the remainder is largely open and is planned to be transformed into a park. However, this location presented significant challenges due to its delicate urban grain. On one side of the site, residential buildings with very narrow facades, approximately 4 to 6 metres wide and as low as 4 metres in height, create a highly sensitive context. Introducing a large-scale theatre element, such as a 30 metre fly tower, felt inappropriate in relation to this scale. Another major constraint was the presence of residential windows facing directly onto the site, meaning that all residents would overlook the new building, leaving no opportunity for blind or secondary elevations. In addition, truck access was extremely limited, and the site also carries significant historical value, including archaeological excavations beneath it. Together, these factors made the site difficult to develop.

The second option was the existing location of Theater de Veste. This site, however, appeared relatively small compared to the other proposals and offered limited possibilities for expansion. As a result, it seemed unsuitable for accommodating a significantly larger theatre programme.

The parking area in the eastern part of Zuidpoort was also considered for an extended period. This site offered strong potential for a more iconic building, slightly removed from the immediate everyday flow yet still within walking distance of Delft's city centre. However, further analysis revealed a lack of daily activity in the area, despite its proximity to the pedestrian zone. In addition, the irregular and fragmented edges of the site made it difficult to establish a clear spatial orientation and coherent urban structure.

The final proposed site aligned most closely with the overall approach of the project. Located within a highly frequented pedestrian zone, it offered the opportunity for the theatre to become a genuinely public building. The existing HEMA department store, with its large structural footprint and strong visitor flow, already acts as an urban attractor and provides a strong

foundation for expanding the theatre programme into a more integrated cultural destination. In comparison to the other sites, the surroundings have little historical value and are not part of the characteristic, picturesque Delft housing fabric. The area feels like it could benefit from improvement, yet there is also very little of significant value that would be lost or disrupted. There are no nearby buildings of high historical importance that require special preservation or careful intervention. Truck access appears straightforward and logical, as the site already accommodates several shops that receive daily deliveries.

THE CITY OF DELFT

Urban Development of Zuidpoort, 1830 – today

To understand the site and its surroundings a look into the past is required. The site underwent major changes while Delft was losing many of its beautiful historic buildings. The site is located in the Zuidpoort area of Delft. North of the main Rijn-Schie Canal, within the city center.

In 1837, Delft was a small, impoverished city of about 15,000 inhabitants. It had rich architectural heritage but was economically stagnant. However, the Zuidpoort area embodied both the historic charm and potential for change that would later emerge. The modernization of the Rijn-Schie Canal initiated further redevelopment, reshaping Delft's relationship with its waterways and creating new city "islands." The southern area became industrial, while the north evolved into a parkland called Nieuwe Plantage.

By the 1920s-1930s, urban planning became more theoretical and aesthetic, focusing on city unity and regional integration rather than isolated development. Between the wars, ideas shifted from functional traffic designs to monumental and aesthetic visions of urban cohesion. Delft's Zuidpoort area stagnated somewhat amid these grander ambitions.

After World War II, Delft suffered economic loss. The 1950 Structural Plan introduced the "Organic City" concept, treating Delft as a cohesive organism of functional layers such as traffic, housing and green space.

At the end of the 1960s, the rigid principles of Functionalism in urban planning began to be questioned. Debates initiated by urban planner Harm de Vries and traffic expert Peter Hakkesteeft, regarding the proposed highway route crossing Delft from north to south from Rijswijk to Schiedam through the future Tanthof residential area, highlighted the need for alternative solutions. A simple diversion along the railroad could create space for a large landscape park, introducing ecology as a new planning consideration. The traditional themes of a "habitable city" and "reparation of the urban tissue" were no longer sufficient to capture the broader urban and political discussions taking place.

New priorities emerged, including ecological concerns, public participation, attention to the architectural culture of the city, and a shift from quantity and prosperity toward quality and well-being. These themes translated into concrete urban strategies. The development of new housing types, preservation of historical and recreational spaces, mixed-use (live, work, play)

planning for better functioning districts, increased building density in city centers, prioritization of pedestrians, cyclists, and public transport, and the restriction of motor traffic in residential areas were part of the urban strategy. Delft even became known for pioneering street designs that integrated traffic into neighborhood life.

The younger generation of architects in Delft at that time, influenced by teachers such as Aldo van Eyck and Herman Herzberger, challenged Functionalism from a pragmatic perspective. While earlier critics argued that Functionalism was inhuman, the new critique emphasized that Functionalism could be aesthetically pleasing but failed to function effectively in complex urban contexts. They drew inspiration from Christopher Alexander's 1965 essay *A City is Not a Tree*, which advocated for non-hierarchical urban structures and process-driven planning. According to Alexander, urban form should emerge from rules rather than rigid design, allowing flexibility, adaptability, and optimal social outcomes.

This approach was reflected in projects such as In de Veste and Tanthof. In these developments, finely meshed networks for pedestrians and cyclists were integrated into the historic city fabric, with mixed-use buildings preventing the isolation of commercial and residential functions. In conjunction to the finely meshed tissue an attempt was made to give the large department stores a piece where they wouldn't interfere with the structure. They were reintegrated into the buildings along the canals and the walking paths. Accumulations of stores around parking lots were avoided. The department store the Hema, for instance, was willing to negotiate about a building site that was unfavorable in regard to traffic provisions, but refused to consider a housing programme which would be built on top of and around the store. The Hema building was opened in 1976 with a festive ceremony. The building accommodated a bakery, a full size Hema restaurant and its retail shop. During the opening, the streets were filled with people, marching bands walked the city and a zeppelin with a banner was flying above the city. Hema was truly celebrated by the people of Delft. It became a meeting point for the residents. To this day the Hema sits in that location and hasn't changed its appearance.

Urban form was deliberately flexible: deviations from planning rules were

encouraged to create spatial variety and avoid monotony. The planning process through negotiation between the municipality and agents determined much of the outcome, rather than fixed forms.

At the level of urban zoning, the Compact City concept guided development, while traffic plans were rethought. Highway projects that would disrupt landscapes or the urban fabric were canceled or rerouted, and a comprehensive system of bike paths was introduced, sometimes requiring new tunnels and bridges.

The Zuidpoort area was transformed into a public transport hub connected to the inner city, reflecting a shift toward accessibility and human-centered mobility in contrast to a previous motor-centred mobility.

Overall, the late 1960s and 1970s marked Delft's transition from Functionalism to a process-oriented planning philosophy. This new approach emphasized ecology, public participation, mixed-use development, and adaptive urban forms, with urban spaces emerging from rules and negotiations rather than pre-determined designs. Today, the idea of mixed use still persists. Streets are lined with ground-floor shops and housing above, while larger buildings and retail functions are integrated throughout, creating a dense urban fabric. The historic city center is entirely car-free and accessible only to pedestrians and cyclists, continuing the 1960s vision of human-centered mobility.

AS FOUND

Analysis of the site and its surroundings

Theater de Veste, the existing theater in Delft, is located on the southern edge of the city's historic center. Due to limited capacity and the poor condition of the building, the city of Delft wishes to develop a new venue with a larger seating capacity and an additional venue in the form of a Black Box Theater.

The site selected for the new Theater of the Future is located approximately 150 meters northeast of its current location. Both Theater de Veste and the proposed new site are situated within the previously explained redevelopment area of Zuidpoort. The surrounding buildings were constructed in the 1960/1970s as part of Delft's new urban plan.

The central idea behind the redevelopment of Delft's city center was to introduce a mixed-use structure, with small shops on the ground floor and housing above. In between the mixed-use structure the bigger retail stores found their place. Following the demolition of all buildings in the Zuidpoort area, the urban grain in this part of the city became significantly larger compared to its historic surroundings. The newly constructed buildings differ in scale and structure from the fine-grained historic buildings that previously occupied the site.

The theatre of the future lies between two city squares the Bastiaansplein and the Besteenmarkt. Bastiaansplein is a highly frequented urban square, characterized by modern high-rise buildings and a high volume of pedestrian and bicycle traffic. The square attracts visitors due to the presence of the two large supermarkets, the public library, a huge underground parking facility, as well as retail stores.

In contrast the Besteenmarkt, which is just outside of the redevelopment area of the 1950s, is an intimate and atmospheric square located in the heart of Delft's historic center. It is surrounded by small, traditional dutch brick buildings with pitched roofs and is defined by numerous mature trees and a lively concentration of bars and restaurants. The center of the square functions as a shared terrace for the surrounding establishments

and comes alive especially in the evening, when the entire square becomes animated and vibrant. The Delft public library serves as the connecting element between the old and the new site, with both corners of the building oriented toward it. The library is an important building in Delft and follows an approach that is similar to the idea of the theatre of the future. It is called “OPEN,” and it lives up to its name. The library hosts a wide range of activities and programmes in line with the concept of a contemporary library. It collaborates with various institutions in Delft that focus on education and the arts, and it includes a café, a shop, study spaces, and numerous workshop rooms that can be rented or used for regular events and activities. From my own experience, the library is a well established and highly frequented building in Delft. It is often so busy that its primary function as a library can sometimes feel secondary.

The site for the Theater of the Future is located within a pedestrian zone, making it highly accessible for everyday use. Cars and other vehicles are not allowed to drive in this area except for delivery purposes. The northern and southern edges of the plot are bordered by canals, while the eastern and western sides are defined by buildings that combine retail functions on the ground floor with residential units above.

On the western side of the block, a long and narrow building accommodates a large retail store. This structure is the most recent addition to the block and has undergone several facade modifications over time in response to changes in use and programme. Its architectural language differs significantly from that of the other buildings within the block as well as from its immediate surroundings. The facade consists of atypical design elements, such as circular windows that appear more decorative than functional, and the use of polished grey stone. The brick has been painted white, creating a strong contrast with the surrounding red-brick buildings.

All remaining buildings within the block share a consistent architectural language. They are constructed in red brick and express a strong linearity. Brick columns are articulated in the facades, with the columns projecting approximately 60 cm to create a vertical rhythm. The three buildings that contain residential units on the upper floors feature repetitive facades alternating between windows and balconies. Horizontally, a cantilevered

anopy runs just above the shopfronts at a height of approximately four meters, introducing a strong continuous line in the facade composition. The apartments on the upper floors extend across the full width of the buildings, providing one facade facing the pedestrian zone or canal and another facing the inner courtyard, which functions as a parking and delivery area. Much of this courtyard is covered by a low-rise storage structure attached to the large retail building. even thigh the volume is quiet low compared to the other buidligs it creates a rather unpleasant view for the residents into the courtyard.

The apartment layouts are relatively simple, consisting of elongated rectangular units approximately 5 meters wide and 14 meters deep. Access to the apartments is from the courtyard. Residents enter at ground level from the street, through a secured door and ascend via a staircase to the first floor, where they exit the thermal envelope and reach a long, exposed external gallery serving all units. These galleries function purely as circulation spaces and offer no additional amenity. Upon entering an apartment from the courtyard side, the bedroom is located immediately adjacent to the entrance and faces the courtyard. The kitchen and bathroom occupy the central zone of the plan and do not receive direct daylight. The living room is positioned on the side facing the pedestrian zone, featuring a continuous window band extending across the width of the unit. Each apartment includes a small private balcony. All units are mirrored across the shared load bearing wall separating adjacent apartments. On the ground floor of these apartment buildings, retail units are arranged within the same structural grid. The grid consists of 30 cm × 30 cm columns spaced 4.5 m apart, with the shops occupying the spaces between the columns. Each unit varies in size, adapting to the grid while maintaining a cohesive structural logic. The HEMA building follows a strong linearity in its design. It has very few openings and is entirely clad in red brick, which is slightly lighter and more orange in tone than that of the surrounding buildings. The facade is carefully detailed, featuring subtle ornamental brick projections that articulate its surface. These elements follow a clear rhythm and gradually diminish from the upper floors to the ground floor: the third floor displays the highest density of projecting lines, the second floor features them only

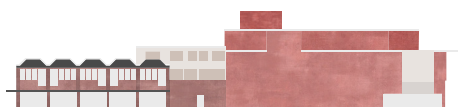
at every third interval, and at ground level only the primary structural expression remains visible. These elements follow a clear rhythm and gradually diminish from the upper floors to the ground floor: the third floor displays the highest density of projecting lines, the second floor features them only at every third interval, and at ground level only the primary structural expression remains visible. The composition is completed by horizontal lintel-like brick bands that run continuously across the entire facade.

The layout of the HEMA building is organized on a 9.6 m × 9.6 m structural grid, supported by mushroom columns with a diameter of 60 cm. Both the ground floor and the first floor have a clear height of 4.3 m and cover approximately 1,600 m² each. The third floor is slightly smaller, measuring around 900 m², and is supported by regular columns aligned to the same grid. Its ceiling height is lower at 3.3 m.

An existing vertical core containing a lift and stairwell is located on the east side of the building and provides the main vertical circulation. The HEMA currently has two entrances, one on the north facade and one on the south. Adjacent to the southern entrance are two escalators leading to the first floor. However, these are no longer in use, as the first floor is currently unoccupied.

When the HEMA first opened in the 1970s, it occupied the entire building. At that time, the store offered much more than retail alone. HEMA functioned as a true department store in the city centre. It included a bakery on the third floor, where all pastries and bread were produced, a large restaurant on the first floor, and only the ground floor was dedicated to retail.

When HEMA introduced a lunchroom in 1926, many people considered it a risky decision. At the time, female service staff were unusual, and eating out was not common for the “ordinary” citizen due to financial constraints. However, the lunchroom became a surprising success. By offering coffee for a dime and affordable hot meals such as a simple menu of soup, meat, vegetables, and dessert for fifty cents HEMA made it possible for many Dutch people to eat out for the first time in their lives. From the beginning, HEMA defined itself through affordability, quality, and accessibility, aiming to bring people together. Its success was rooted in large, open layouts,



simple design, and straightforward food. Over time, HEMA gradually outsourced its baking operations, and the second floor was converted into storage. The restaurant also declined and eventually disappeared. Today, the HEMA in Delft contains only a small, rather hidden dining area located in a dark corner of the store, which feels uninviting and disconnected from the rest of the building. After the restaurant closed, the first floor was mainly rented out to third parties until recently. At present, the space is empty and no longer in use by HEMA or other tenants.

In recent years, the company has reported increasing sales after a difficult period during and before the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past three years, its performance has improved, and it has shifted its internal concept. In 2026, HEMA celebrated its 100th anniversary and introduced a new initiative called HEMA100. With this concept, the company redesigned its product range, focusing more strongly on food, improved quality, and refined design. It has also made significant investments in its restaurant operations.

However, its core identity remains unchanged: offering affordable food in a fast, accessible format. HEMA continues to position itself as a store for all social classes, while adapting to contemporary expectations by introducing healthier options and food that aligns with different dietary needs. The overall layout of the new HEMA100 restaurant has remained similar to its original concept. It operates as a self-service system, with spacious seating that functions like a communal dining hall. Visitors can easily enter the space and take a break without necessarily consuming anything.

The HEMA store in Delft has not yet been updated according to this new concept and is therefore overdue for renovation in order to remain competitive and continue attracting customers. The interior currently feels outdated compared to other refurbished HEMA locations.

The core philosophy of HEMA aligns strongly with the proposed approach for the theatre of the future. Its aim of bringing people together through affordability, accessibility, and a celebration of simplicity resonates directly with the idea of a publicly oriented cultural building.

It therefore makes sense to connect the HEMA program with the theatre of the future, fostering dialogue between the two functions and making the theatre more accessible to a wider audience who might not usually enter a



theatre building. In this way, the theatre can benefit from the presence and public character of the HEMA store. To ensure a strong mutual relationship in which both functions reinforce one another, the transition between the two should be seamless and inviting. The theatre foyer should spark curiosity in the average HEMA customer and provide a welcoming space where people can feel comfortable.

BETWEEN CITY AND STAGE

Matter of Scale, Where Space Performs

The relationship between the city and the stage was explored through a physical model. The aim was to communicate an atmosphere by representing the transition from the city into the stage space. The model did not seek to depict an existing scene or structure.

This investigation resulted in two distinct models, exploring how space can be shaped through performance, a continuous interplay of scale, materiality, and perception.

The first model focused strongly on the dimensions and characteristics of objects. Theatre is often a secluded experience, largely hidden from the surrounding city. Confined within designated performance spaces, it can feel detached from everyday life. Yet theatre has the unique ability to transform scale and perception. Within a single room, an entirely different world can emerge. Entering a theatre can feel like stepping into an alternative reality, one that is temporarily removed from the ordinary and concealed from the outside world.

This concept is explored through a model that investigates the blurring of scale and spatial perception while creating distinct atmospheres within a single environment. The performance space is defined by four freestanding walls that never fully meet, allowing light and movement to pass through the gaps between them. At the centre, the stage is positioned without a clearly defined boundary. Instead, a subtle curved step gently divides the room into two zones. This step can function as a threshold between performer and audience, or become part of the performance itself.

The walls seem monumental thick, heavy, and imposing in height. Constructed from gypsum, they appear cold and dense, reinforcing their solidity and making visitors feel small in comparison. Their monumentality distorts the perception of scale, creating an atmosphere that feels both overwhelming and ambiguous.

The space is shared equally by audience and performers. Upon entering, the floor material shifts from a light coloured surface, matching the walls, to a darker, slightly reflective grey finish that captures light and reflects stage

props, distinguishing what is inside the performative space and what is outside.

The space has no fixed orientation. Any opening may serve as an entrance or become part of the performance itself. Curtains positioned in front of the walls allow certain openings to be concealed, enabling the space to be continuously reconfigured. The curtains are hung from the wall and are placed at a lower height to reveal the walls behind it, when fully closed. Their circular arrangement echoes the curved step, softening the rigid geometry of the walls and reshaping the spatial experience. This interplay heightens the contrast between the heavy, linear walls and the soft, fluid curtains. Above, a highly reflective ceiling visually unifies the space and introduces further ambiguity. Where the walls meet the ceiling, the room appears to extend infinitely upward. In contrast, where the walls stop short of the ceiling, they seem to float within the space, contradicting their apparent weight and solidity.

Another layer of contrast emerges through the curtains themselves. Although lightweight white fabric is typically associated with airiness and movement, here the curtains rest heavily on the floor, conveying an unexpected sense of weight and grounding. Within the context of performance, they also serve an acoustic function, softening and shaping the sound within the room.

The minimal nature of the space allows it to host a wide variety of performances and atmospheres. Through the introduction of only a few pieces of furniture placed at the centre — a simple daybed and a standing lamp — the space becomes unexpectedly intimate. Soft, warm light filters in from behind the walls, creating curiosity about what lies beyond and how far the space continues. This gentle illumination enhances the feeling of intimacy, transforming the massive enclosing walls from something imposing into something almost protective, as though they are embracing the space.

Lighting and props have the ability to completely transform the atmosphere of the space, despite the architecture itself remaining unchanged. Because the environment is minimal and abstract, even subtle interventions can dramatically alter the emotional experience and perception of the room. Light becomes an architectural element in itself, capable of reshaping the mood, depth, and scale of the space.

In contrast to the previous, coloured or directional lighting can completely destabilise this intimacy. A deep red glow transforms the same space into something theatrical, unsettling, and ambiguous. Shadows intensify, reflections become more pronounced, and the scale of the walls feels exaggerated and oppressive. The reflective ceiling amplifies this effect, allowing light to spread endlessly upward and making the room feel immersive and disorienting. What once felt calm and domestic suddenly becomes dramatic, ritualistic, or even uncanny.

Props play an equally important role in redefining the atmosphere. Because the space is intentionally sparse, each object gains significance and has the power to suggest an entirely different narrative. A single stool placed in the centre can evoke isolation and tension, while soft furnishings can create intimacy and comfort. The minimal nature of the setting allows props to act almost symbolically, where even the smallest intervention can shift the emotional reading of the space.

Together, light and props continuously reconfigure the perception of the theatre. They allow the same architectural environment to host vastly different experiences, transforming the space from intimate to monumental, from calm to unsettling, and from domestic to theatrical.

The second model investigates the preception of space. Blurring the boundary between reality and theatrical performance can be achieved not only through the content of a play, but through the spatial conditions in which the performance takes place. Every space holds a distinct character, shaped by light, materials, and spatial organisation. The perception of space is subjective and can be transformed through the presence of people, the furniture, light, time of day, sound, and temperature. These elements continuously interact, making space dynamic rather than fixed, and allowing it to shift between the ordinary and the performative.

In theater, space is often carefully designed and adapted to convey a specific idea or artistic vision. However, performance today is no longer confined to the traditional proscenium stage. It can emerge anywhere within everyday environments, transitional zones, or architecturally ambiguous settings. The challenge, therefore, lies in creating atmospheres that may contrast with the inherent qualities of a given space. The intervention introduces tension and strangeness, encouraging the audience to question their perception and awareness of their surroundings. This approach aligns with contemporary theater practices, where scenography is no longer a neutral backdrop but an active agent in shaping meaning and experience.

The space is not immediately legible. It reveals depth, ambiguity, and a lack of clearly defined boundaries. New materials are introduced, including soft curtains and a reflective, delicate floor, which contrastcontrast with the exterior. This deliberate ambiguity introduces a sense of unfamiliarity that both challenges and engages the audience.

Walls that appear thick and massive from the outside are revealed to be hollow, containing stepped seating integrated into their depth. The audience observes the performance while being surrounded by deep, cold walls that absorb sound, heightening a sense of isolation and focus. Opposite the seating area, the performance space unfolds as an open and vertical volume. Its structural framework is reduced to columns and beams, emphasizing exposure and incompleteness. Around and between the structure, similarly articulated walls, some with openings, along with stairs and curtains, complete the scenography.

Carefully positioned lighting reinforces and enhances the adapted spatial

organization, guiding perception while maintaining uncertainty. The design does not merely host performance but becomes performative itself, continuously negotiating the boundary between reality and fiction, while embracing strangeness as a tool to deepen the theatrical experience. Both models engage with fictional existing structures that are heavy, solid, and oversized. The spaces are defined by fixed elements that appear almost untouchable, while the remaining areas are highly adaptable.

Certain elements within these spaces make them visually and spatially compelling, such as reflective materials and heavy curtains. Together, the models convey the idea that performance can occur in any space, depending on how the space is shaped by it and the emotions it evokes. Theatre, therefore, is not limited by its immediate surroundings.

DESIGN APPROACH

Whoever comes, can stay

The Theater of the Future envisioned by the City of Delft differs significantly from the existing theater. Rather than functioning primarily as an evening venue, it aims to become part of everyday life by accommodating a broader range of activities that attract people throughout the day. In addition to this expanded program, the new theater will include a second performance space in the form of a black box theater for approximately 250 people, alongside a main auditorium with 800 seats.

At present, the theater operates as a receiving house, which is a common model in the Netherlands. The program changes nightly, with production companies arriving in the early afternoon. Trucks dock backstage to unload props and technical equipment required for each performance. Visiting companies often bring part of their own staff, meaning the theater is temporarily occupied and operated by different groups. However, the limited size of the current loading dock, stage, and backstage areas restricts the range of productions the city can host. Large-scale performances and trucks cannot be accommodated, and the stage is unable to support more complex productions. More generally, the spatial conditions of the existing theater are inadequate, including the facilities provided for artists and staff.

The proposed new site offers significantly more space, allowing for the inclusion of both performance venues as well as improved working conditions. As the Theater of Delft seeks to become more visible and integrated within the city, its program and opening hours must be reconsidered. Currently, the theater remains closed until shortly before performances begin. In contrast, the theatre of the future should be more than just a performance venue. It should serve as a place where audiences can engage in dialogue about culture and society, where theatre intersects with other art forms, and where people from all backgrounds feel welcome and can find meaning. It should enable performances to occur throughout the building, creating a dynamic environment that is at once festive and for the everyday, serious and playful.

The Theater of the Future should incorporate programs that attract people daily and encourage continuous interaction with the urban environment. Its new location along a pedestrian street with open facades creates an inviting and accessible setting that supports this ambition.

The new design proposal follows the model of contemporary cultural institutions that function as public “third spaces,” extending beyond their primary role as theaters. Precedents such as Theater Basel, Amare in The Hague, and the Barbican Centre in London serve as key inspirations. These institutions are open throughout the day and offer a variety of activities and spaces where visitors can spend time without the obligation to consume.

The Theater Basel provides an important example, as it was not originally designed as a third space. Built in 1970, it initially fulfilled a conventional theatrical function. Like many theaters, it faced challenges such as reduced funding and declining visitor numbers. In response, it introduced a more open and accessible public program. Located in the city center between the town hall and the train station, the theater is directly connected to the Tinguely Fountain, which transforms the outdoor forecourt into a public space for art. The fountain was built between 1975 and 1977 on the site of the former city theater stage and was designed by the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely. Its ten kinetic figures, arranged like performers on a stage, continuously enact an ever-changing spectacle, blurring the line between sculpture and performance. In this way, theatricality extends beyond the building itself into the urban space, inviting passersby to engage with art in their everyday environment. The theater now opens its doors daily, offering a foyer with a bar, reading areas, children’s spaces, and a large open zone that accommodates performances, discussions, and informal gatherings. This transformation has successfully increased both visitor numbers and revenue.

Amare in The Hague, by contrast, was designed from the outset as a multifunctional cultural hub and a contemporary “third space.” It houses multiple venues, including a dance theater, a concert hall, a performance space within a church located across the building, and a smaller multifunctional hall associated with a university. While it operates as a receiving house, it incorporates educational functions, with a music school occupying the upper floors for both children and higher education students, although these areas are not publicly accessible.

A defining feature of Amare is its foyer, which is conceived as an extension of the public realm. The foyer is long and positioned directly along a pedestrian zone, with a fully glazed facade that allows passersby to look inside, visually connecting the interior with the city. With entrances at both ends, it functions as a passage as well as a destination, reinforcing its role as an extension of the street. A large, multifunctional staircase serves not only as a circulation element but also as informal seating, enabling visitors to gather and observe performances taking place within the foyer itself. These performances can either be set against the backdrop of the city, or framed through the use of curtains. A ceiling-mounted

lighting rig further supports this adaptability, allowing the space to shift between everyday use and staged events.

Adjacent to the main foyer is the “market square,” a more intimate and flexible area that supports a variety of informal and community oriented activities. This space can host flea markets, study areas, relaxation zones, children’s play areas, open mic sessions, as well as yoga and dance classes. The Barbican Centre in London operates at a larger scale but follows a similar philosophy. It is a comprehensive cultural complex that includes theaters, cinemas, galleries,

restaurants, a library, and even residential units. Its mixed-use nature and multiple access points make it highly accessible, while still maintaining a degree of separation between public and private areas.

Together, these precedents demonstrate how theaters can evolve into open, inclusive cultural centers that engage with the city throughout the day.

They illustrate the potential for the Theater of the Future in Delft to move beyond its traditional role and become an active and accessible part of urban life. This ambition directly informs the

approach to the new design proposal, where the theater must not only function as a performance venue but also as an integrated element within an existing and complex urban fabric.

Given the presence of residential units on the upper floors of the urban block, these homes must be carefully respected. The new theater should enhance, rather than diminish, the living conditions of the residents.

It should avoid obstructing views or reducing access to daylight, and instead contribute positively to the overall quality of the shared urban environment. This requires a sensitive architectural response that balances openness and activity with privacy and comfort.

In addition to the residential context, the existing HEMA building must be considered. Designed in the 1970s by the architects Lucas & Nijmeyer, the building has long been an integral part of Delft's city center. It has continuously housed a HEMA store, although its internal organization has changed over time. Originally, the entire building was occupied by the company, with retail on the ground floor, a restaurant on the first floor, and a bakery with storage above. Today, only the ground floor remains actively used as a retail space, with a small, enclosed restaurant located at the back. The upper floors are largely underutilized. The second floor is mostly vacant, aside from a small lunchroom and staff facilities, while the top floor is only partially used for storage.

HEMA, as a well-known Dutch retail brand approaching its 100th anniversary in 2026, remains culturally and commercially relevant despite the broader challenges faced by physical retail in the age of online shopping. In recent years, the company has successfully increased its sales and recovered from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, by adapting its sales strategy. With the introduction of the "HEMA 100" concept, the focus has shifted toward food related

products and the integration of cafés and restaurants, while maintaining its core principle of affordability. This evolution aligns with the idea of creating accessible, everyday spaces that attract a diverse public. Given its historical significance and continued presence in Delft, the HEMA building should be incorporated into the project. Its existing structure and underused spaces present an opportunity to extend the program of the Theater of the Future. The project should contribute to a hybrid urban environment in which cultural, commercial, and social functions overlap, an approach already envisioned in the historic urban development plans of the 1960s. In this way, the project can build on both the spatial strategies observed in the precedents and the specific qualities of the site, creating a theater that is

deeply embedded in the life of the city.

Building on this approach, the groundfloor becomes a central element in establishing this connection between theater and city. Open along the pedestrian zone, it creates an inviting and accessible space for the residents of Delft, functioning as the main foyer of the Theater of the Future. During the day, the foyer functions as a social environment where people can meet, have a coffee, read, work, study, bring their children, interact with others, or simply spend time. In addition, it should be flexible enough to host small-scale events such as flea markets, informal performances, workshops, discussions, readings, and talks.

In the evening, the space transforms into a more traditional theater foyer, capable of accommodating up to 800 visitors attending the performance in the main auditorium. A key aspect of the design is its relationship with the adjacent HEMA store. The transition between the foyer and the store should be seamless, creating a continuous and coherent spatial experience. As HEMA already attracts a wide and diverse audience, the theater can benefit from this proximity by engaging visitors who might not otherwise enter a cultural institution.

The threshold between the theater and the HEMA could be defined by a newly designed café or restaurant, serving both as a shared social space and as a point of connection between the two programs. Ideally, the theater and the HEMA could share a common entrance at ground level, further reinforcing their integration.

To truly realize the building's mixed-use character, it must accommodate more than just a foyer as a third space, alongside a theater, a shopping facility, and residential units. The first floor of the HEMA building, which is currently unoccupied, offers strong spatial qualities and should be integrated into the project.

At present, Delft lacks dedicated spaces for temporary exhibitions and emerging artistic practices. While the city hosts several museums with permanent collections, there are limited opportunities for local artists or short-term exhibitions in a central, accessible location. As a result, many cultural activities are dispersed across surrounding cities. Within Delft, the Orange Hall at the Faculty of Architecture at TU Delft frequently hosts exhibitions

such as Archiprix, business fairs, and student showcases. The new space as part of the theater of the future could also be considered an extension of the Strandbeesten Mortuary by Theo Jansen, a renowned Delft based artist known for his kinetic sculptures made from yellow plastic tubes. However, his current exhibition space is located in the southern part of Delft. Both of these venues remain poorly integrated into the urban fabric. The Theater of the Future has the potential to bring this type of cultural programming into the city center, making it more visible and accessible to a wider audience. When not used for exhibitions, the space could support a range of alternative functions, such as study areas during exam periods, a pop-up cinema, or larger workshops requiring flexible spatial conditions. The addition of a black box theater further strengthens this vision by providing an experimental and adaptable environment for diverse forms of art and performance. Such a space encourages unconventional uses and aligns with contemporary cultural practices.

In this way, the theater becomes a continuously active and flexible environment that supports both cultural production and everyday urban life. The Theater of the Future is no longer conceived solely as a space for theatrical performances. Instead, it becomes a platform that accommodates performance, interaction, communication, and community.

Design Concept

The proposal replaces four buildings located at the center of the site that currently do not contain residential units and are primarily used for storage and retail. This is where the new theater is positioned. The building is oriented along the east west axis, stretching from Kruisstraat to Paradijspoort. A key factor in determining the theaters placement is truck access. The building requires daily deliveries, and loading and unloading must operate efficiently. Due to city regulations, trucks can only access the site from Kruisstraat on the eastern side. This condition defines the location of the theaters back of house areas.

The loading dock is positioned directly at the edge of the plot, ensuring that trucks do not block the street while also allowing for smooth integration with the theaters internal logistics. Immediately adjacent to the loading dock is the backstage area, with the stage and auditorium connected directly to it.

As a result, the western side of the site naturally becomes the front of house zone. The theater acts as the heart of the project, with surrounding functions organized around it.

This approach is also reflected in the material strategy. The auditorium, stage, and fly tower are constructed using opace zinc panelling, anchoring the building within the urban context. In contrast, the surrounding program is designed with lighter structures that appear to float alongside it.

To create more space in the front of house area, the underside of the auditorium is lifted, extending the foyer and generating a distinctive spatial quality beneath it. The auditorium and fly tower require significant height to function properly, exceeding the height of the surrounding buildings. The design therefore aims to lower the outer edges of these volumes toward the street as much as possible, while allowing the inner edges to rise. This results in a large, stepped shed roof, makinf the auditorium become its own object. The overall shape of the obejct is a diamnd shape resulting from the interior seating arrangement, giving the new theater a dynamic silhouette. To have one unified architectural language the outhter walls of the auditorium are slightly sloped. The new building clearly distinguishes itself from the existing structures.

The ground floor of the new theater plays a crucial role in its integration

into the urban fabric. As previously explained the site is located in a vibrant area of the city. The same criteria for the ideas of a third space by Ray Oldenburg perfectly. The underside of the auditorium, along with two adjacent double height spaces, forms part of the foyer. This space extends from the existing HEMA building to the southern edge of the site, where it sits subtly beneath the residential units.

As a result, the foyer varies in height from 12.5 meters to 3 meters, creating a range of distinct spatial qualities.

During the summer months, the foyer should be able to open its facade, dissolving the boundary between interior and exterior and allowing the space to merge with the adjacent pedestrian zone. In this condition, the foyer can function almost as an extension of the public square. Through its highly public and flexible nature, the foyer increases the visibility of the theater within the city and attracts a broader audience, including those who do not typically engage with the Theater of Delft.

In contrast, the existing HEMA building, which will be integrated into the project, features a closed and solid facade. It is clad in bright red brick with vertical articulation. The interior is more raw, characterized by 60 cm diameter round concrete columns and a ceiling height of 4.2 meters. This space allows for a highly flexible program, such as temporary exhibitions or events. Its rough interior quality also suits the character of a black box theater, which will be partially accommodated within the existing structure. The interior will be preserved in its original state, creating an atmosphere that feels raw and slightly industrial providing a contrast to the new building.

^At night, when the theater comes alive, the facade will glow like a lantern in the heart of the city.

The black box, located on the third floor of the existing HEMA structure, rises 9 m above the roofline and features the same translucent facade, adding to the city's nighttime vibrancy.

Groundfloor

The ground floor of the project is divided into four main zones: the HEMA store, the back-of-house facilities, the auditorium, and the foyer. Together, these functions are distributed across the entire urban block.

On the northern side of the site, the HEMA store is located, along with its offices and storage facilities. The eastern side accommodates the back-of-house functions, strategically positioned adjacent to the truck access route.

Next to the back-of-house area are the new office spaces for the theatre and a green room for performers. Both are situated at street level, creating a visible connection between the city, the artists, and the theatre's operational spaces. The western side of the project is occupied by the public foyer, directly connected to the pedestrian zone.

The main entrance to the theatre is integrated into the existing HEMA structure, expanding the current entrance and creating a shared point of access for both the theatre and the HEMA store. Upon entering, visitors can choose to take the stairs or lift to the first floor or remain on the ground floor. They are welcomed by a small box office and a programme wall displaying upcoming theatre events.

From the entrance, visitors can either enter the café, which creates a threshold between the two structures, or continue towards the theatre side, where the cloakroom is located. Both routes lead into the same central space, as the HEMA store and theatre are seamlessly integrated. During the evening, the HEMA section can be closed off, allowing the entrance to function exclusively as the theatre's main entrance. By sharing the entrance during daytime hours, the theatre becomes more accessible and visible to the public.

To the north of the entrance, the HEMA café and restaurant are positioned, reinforcing the idea of providing affordable food and hospitality for everyone. The café combines elements of a theatre shop with HEMA products, creating an intentionally ambiguous atmosphere in which visitors are not immediately aware of which part of the building they occupy. The café opens onto the pedestrian street, strengthening its relationship with the public realm.

Three large new windows are introduced into the HEMA façade. These windows incorporate seating areas where visitors can sit and look out onto the

street, while passers-by can observe activity inside. This visual exchange activates the façade and sparks curiosity among pedestrians. Beyond the café, the main retail area of the HEMA store gradually unfolds. The store itself remains largely unchanged in terms of programme and concept. As a popular and essential retail destination in Delft, preserving the HEMA's identity and function is considered important for the city. Attached to the store are the servant spaces required. The existing courtyard, currently used for deliveries and parking, will be covered and transformed into new ground-floor storage space. This significantly improves the current situation, in which storage is located on the second floor, making the transport of goods throughout the building inefficient and time consuming.

Adjacent to the storage area are the offices and staff lunchroom. Both spaces are oriented towards the street, representing a significant improvement over the existing situation, where these functions were hidden deep within the building and lacked access to daylight and views.

On the eastern side of the building, the truck access and loading facilities are located. A compact loading bay, capable of accommodating up to three trucks, is positioned directly adjacent to the street. This delivery zone is shared by both the theatre and HEMA, serving deliveries, waste collection, and mail distribution.

The delivery schedules of the two Hema and the Theater differ significantly, allowing the shared facility to function efficiently. HEMA receives deliveries three times per week, typically around 7:00 a.m., whereas theatre companies generally require access from midday onwards. In theory, this means that delivery vehicles rarely overlap, although the loading bay is large enough to accommodate both functions simultaneously if necessary. The loading dock is fully covered, providing a comfortable and weather-protected environment for loading and unloading goods. It is enclosed by a folding metal door that aligns with the architectural language of the new façade.

Positioned between the loading dock and the theatre's new office spaces is the artists' entrance. Both the offices and the entrance have a direct relationship with the street, greatly improving the working environment for

theatre staff. Compared to the existing situation, employees benefit from more generous spaces and a stronger connection to both the city and the theatre itself.

The artists' entrance remains intentionally discreet, reflecting the preferences of many performers. Upon entering, artists arrive at a small reception area before continuing into a welcoming green room. The green room overlooks the canal-lined street and surrounding trees, providing a pleasant and calm environment before performances. From here, artists have direct access to the dressing rooms located on the floor above.

An accessible dressing room is located on the ground floor. A gently sloping ramp connects this space directly to stage level, ensuring full wheelchair accessibility and creating an inclusive environment for performers of all abilities.

The western side of the ground floor, adjacent to the pedestrian street, is dedicated to the public foyer. The ambition for this space is to create a highly public interior at the heart of Delft. Its location aligns closely with the characteristics of the „third place“ as described by sociologist Ray Oldenburg. According to Oldenburg, third places are often situated along everyday routes, at important intersections, or within mixed-use urban environments where diverse social groups naturally come together. Their success depends on accessibility, visibility, and permeability, allowing people to enter freely and appropriate the space according to their own needs. In this way, they function as connective tissue within the city, linking private and public life while strengthening local identity and social cohesion.

The foyer extends from the southern edge of the site to the existing HEMA structure. Multiple entrances provide access from different directions, allowing visitors to experience the space from various perspectives and reinforcing its public character.

The southern section of the foyer reuses parts of the existing building structure. As a result, the ceiling height is limited to approximately three metres, creating a more intimate atmosphere within the larger public building. This spatial condition informs the programme accommodated within this area. The space is designed to host a variety of community-oriented activities, including language courses, book clubs, knitting workshops, arts

and crafts sessions, and other informal gatherings. In addition, it provides co-working spaces, reading niches, board games, lounge areas, and a dedicated children's zone. Sliding partitions allow the space to be subdivided into smaller rooms, creating flexible settings that can offer both privacy and acoustic separation when required.

Moving northwards through the foyer, the compressed and intimate atmosphere gradually opens into a generous double height space. This new volume forms part of the new proposal and is characterised by its openness, daylight, and spatial generosity. It functions as the central circulation and gathering space of the foyer, connecting the various programme areas, providing access to the auditorium, and linking visitors to the balcony level on the first floor.

From here, visitors continue beneath the auditorium itself. This unique and expressive space is defined by the structure that supports the theatre above. A crossed-beam ceiling spans overhead, shaping the character of the entire volume and making the building's construction visible to its users. The result is a spatial experience that is both distinctive and memorable. Designed as a flexible public interior, this area can accommodate a wide variety of events and activities. The space is generous in scale and deliberately retains a robust, unfinished character. Five monumental columns, sculpturally shaped and carefully integrated into the architecture, support the auditorium above. These columns extend deep into the ground to transfer the substantial structural loads of the theatre.

Beyond their structural role, the columns also serve as pieces of furniture. On the side facing away from the street and towards the bar, each column opens into a small niche where visitors can sit, rest, or work. These niches incorporate small shelves that provide space for personal belongings and charging points for electronic devices. The columns also feature integrated hooks on the outside that increase the flexibility of the space, allowing them to function as informal coat racks or support temporary installations and events.

To ensure optimal acoustic performance within the auditorium, each column is separated from the surrounding floor finish by a rubber isolation joint. This prevents vibrations from travelling through the foyer floor into

the structural elements supporting the theatre above.

Apart from these structural elements, the space beneath the auditorium remains largely unobstructed. On a daily basis, the theatre provides movable furniture such as chairs, coffee tables, and beanbags, allowing visitors to appropriate and organise the space according to their own needs. Storage for this furniture is located nearby, enabling the layout to be easily adapted throughout the day.

This flexibility allows the space to serve many different purposes. During daytime hours, it functions as an open public interior for work, relaxation, meetings, and community activities. In the evening, it transforms into a traditional theatre foyer capable of accommodating up to 800 visitors attending performances. In addition, the space can host a variety of events such as readings, performances, yoga classes, dance workshops, flea markets, and many other public activities.

At the back of the space, where the floor level reaches its lowest point, a bar is located. While it supports theatre related events and gatherings, it is not intended to operate continuously. The public foyer is conceived as a genuinely inclusive space that does not require visitors to make a purchase in order to occupy it, ensuring that the foyer remains accessible to all.

Between the space beneath the auditorium and the street, a long glass facade defines the edge of the building. Two rows of columns articulate this facade and support the first-floor balcony above.

The facade consists of tall industrial folding windows in a reddish tone. These windows can be fully opened, dissolving the boundary between inside and outside. This effect is further strengthened by extending the pedestrian pavement into the building. The same reddish brick herringbone pavement continues indoors, reinforcing the continuity between public space and interior.

On the opposite side of the auditorium, another double-height space opens up, similar to the southern one, creating a second transition zone. From here, a secondary entrance to the main hall provides access to the other side of the auditorium. This threshold space connects the existing HEMA structure with the theatre.

Service spaces are located on both sides of this double-height volume. An open and inviting staircase leads visitors up to a mezzanine, forming a link between the old and the new parts of the building. From the mezzanine, visitors can once again access the first-floor balcony, continuing the spatial sequence throughout the project.

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The two double height spaces located on either side of the auditorium, do not provide a direct visual connection to the street. In fact, the street is not visible from these areas, as the façade is fully enclosed.

Instead, the interior is animated by interactive walls that communicate with the foyer. These walls incorporate bookshelves, ticket vending machines, clothing exchange racks, and integrated furniture such as benches. As natural light is limited in this zone, daylight is introduced from the first floor, where it filters down into the foyer below.

Towards the street, the facade opens up completely. The groundfloor is activated by small stands and kiosks. These elements follow the same industrial design language as the windows and are designed to fold vertically, clad in metal when closed.

In the existing street condition, informal food stands are already present and are highly valued and frequently used by the citizens of Delft. The design builds upon this existing urban activity, actively engaging with the street, encouraging people to pause, and breaking up the length of the facade through small scale interventions and points of activity. Overall, the project transforms the ground floor into a highly permeable public interior that merges theatre, HEMA, and public life into a continuous urban landscape. By interweaving commercial, cultural, and community functions, the design creates a sequence spatial conditions, from intimate rooms to large double height spaces that support both everyday use and large-scale public events.

The architecture deliberately blurs the boundary between inside and outside, extending the street into the building through material continuity, activated façades, and openable structures. At the same time, deeper interior zones introduce a more sheltered and atmospheric world shaped by structure, light, and programmatic flexibility.

First Floor

second floor

audi

materiality and construc-

neighbourstion

The first floor includes back of house area and the first floor of the existing structure of hema,

Auditorium

The city of Delft currently has one main theatre, Theater de Veste. It contains a single auditorium with a capacity of 500 seats, arranged across two balconies, and a stage measuring 10×15 metres with a fixed proscenium opening of 12 metres. At present, there is almost no side stage space. Theater de Veste aims to expand and improve its facilities. The brief calls for a new auditorium with 800 seats and a stage appropriately scaled to support this increase.

The proposal offers a significant improvement, featuring a stage measuring 22×18 metres, along with two side stages of 11×22 metres and 6×22 metres. The proscenium will no longer be fixed, allowing flexibility with a minimum opening of 12 metres and a maximum of 15 metres.

Given the increased stage size, the proposed Theatre of the Future is comparable to theatres in cities such as Almere, Utrecht, Apeldoorn, Maastricht, The Hague, and Tilburg. A closer examination of their programming reveals that concerts are the most frequent events, followed by traditional theatre and comedy performances. This indicates that the auditorium should be acoustically adaptable to both spoken word and music. To achieve this, the interior walls will incorporate rotating acoustic panels. This flexibility ensures that the theatre can host a wide range of performances without compromising acoustic quality.

The new stage will also be capable of accommodating performances by Nederlands Dans Theater, one of the world's leading contemporary dance companies. Based in The Hague, the company regularly performs to sold out audiences and could attract a significant number of visitors to Delft. In addition, the Theatre of the Future will include an orchestra pit, typically used for opera and dance productions, which further enhances its suitability for hosting companies such as Nederlands Dans Theater. This addition strengthens Delft's potential to become an appealing venue for high profile performances.

The auditorium is designed as a single tier space with 23 rows, each one metre deep. The number of seats per row ranges from 12 to 32, forming an overall oval shape. Each row is elevated by a 23 cm step and arranged along a curve to ensure optimal sightlines from every seat. Dutch fire regulations for theatres allow up to 50 seats per row, provided there is at least 47 cm of clearance between the back of one seat and the folded seat behind. The seats themselves are 55 to 57 cm wide, ensuring comfort during performances.

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The auditorium is envisioned as one unified space, a living room for the city of Delft where everyone gathers under a single dome, reinforcing a sense of community. To create a warm and intimate atmosphere, the interior will be clad in soft, warm timber, while the technical ceiling will be completely concealed. Each step will have a wooden finish to emphasize the feeling of unity. The seats will be upholstered in a calm, dark green fabric, enhancing the overall sense of comfort and cohesion.

To enhance the sense of everyone sharing the same space, access to the auditorium is intentionally designed to be narrow and intimate. All spectators ascend together via a main ramp to reach the stage level, where the wheelchair-accessible seating is located. From there, the audience arrives at a staircase approximately 1.5 metres wide, which follows the oval shape of the auditorium and subtly reveals what lies beyond.

The staircase is deliberately stark, with white painted walls and ceiling, creating a neutral transition space. From this point, each row is directly accessible. The staircase and the auditorium interior are separated by deep, narrow walls. Each pair of walls forms a corridor, clad in wood that hints at the warm materiality of the auditorium beyond. Doors are seamlessly integrated within these walls.

Upon reaching their row, spectators pass through two walls, each approximately 90 cm deep, and emerge into a large, open space. This space feels warm, calm, and unified, defined by a single material and animated by the presence of the audience.

Once everyone is seated and the performance is about to begin, the doors embedded within the walls close simultaneously, marking a clear and collective transition into the performance.

To create a strong connection between the exterior of the theatre and the interior of the auditorium, the walls and ceiling follow the lines of the buildings outer silhouette. The auditorium ceiling reflects the shape of the roof, including both the main volume and the fly tower. The interior walls continue the butterfly roof geometry from the surrounding programme into the auditorium itself.

This approach results in a dynamic and playful interior, making the space visually engaging rather than a simple box filled with seats. The lines within the walls are defined by the individual doors and the rotating acoustic panels positioned above them. The doors vary in height, forming a subtle butterfly-like profile. Where each door ends, the acoustic panel begins, continuing the architectural language.

Designing a theatre came with many unexpected challenges and felt unlike any other project. To be able to design a theatre properly, it was necessary to study and understand its internal processes and how the building operates. The infrastructure and logistics of a theatre are essential to creating a successful design. Theatres across the world operate in different ways, resulting in two main types: the receiving house and the producing house.

In Germany, where I grew up, almost all theatres have their own production teams and companies, resulting in large and complex building structures. At first, it therefore felt unusual that Theater de Veste was relatively small, had no production facilities, and did not host seasonal repertory shows. Instead, each event is almost a one-time performance. It was also noted that the theatre has limited engagement with the city and lacks the financial capacity to remain open during the day.

My initial instinct was to transform the theatre from a receiving house into a producing house. I assumed that expanding the internal programme would solve its financial challenges and that making the production process visible would strengthen its connection to the city of Delft. However, after further research into theatre systems in the Netherlands, it became clear that theatres do not function in this way. The Netherlands is a small country where cities are closely connected and easily reachable within half a day. Touring productions are therefore very common, with companies travelling efficiently from city to city without major logistical difficulties.

Following this realisation, it became clear that the theatre needed to engage with the city in different ways. Further research into contemporary theatre and public buildings highlighted the importance of accessibility and public engagement. After resolving the internal logistics of the building, including delivery processes, which are a key aspect of a receiving house, as well as the relationship between stage, auditorium, and site, the focus of the project shifted towards creating a cultural hub for the community of Delft.

Gradually, week by week, the design expanded across the site. The next challenge was to define the building's purpose within its urban context: what it offers to the people of Delft and who it ultimately belongs to. This included rethinking the existing HEMA store to create a clear threshold between the existing retail functions and the newly inserted theatre.

Over time, the internal organisation of the building became more resolved, but the exterior still lacked expression and meaningful engagement with its surroundings. Throughout the design process, careful attention was paid to the neighbouring context, ensuring that the project respects its surroundings and gives back to the city in a meaningful way.

The exterior eventually developed into an active and engaging ground-floor facade that responds to the adjacent shopping street. Although it sometimes felt as though the auditorium and core theatre functions became less dominant over time, the interior design was continuously refined through many iterations, improving its functionality, aesthetics, and atmosphere.

While the project still contains some imperfections, I believe it is driven by the right intentions and forms a meaningful contribution to the city of Delft, improving its social and spatial conditions.