

a place to remember

studying the intangible values of  
the V&D department store in Leiden



H&A Graduation Studio  
Studio Vacant Heritage  
2020-2021

AR3A010  
Research plan

Iris Jansen



1 Maarsmansteeg (1964)



2 Maarsmansteeg (1974)

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# Introduction

The topic of this design studio and research is the department stores of Vroom & Dreesmann (V&D). The buildings are large in scale, express a clear corporate identity and often have a monumental value. Since the bankruptcy of the V&D in 2016, many have remained vacant, leaving a desolate image in the heart of many city centres.

"Things change without that we ask it to be changed, but somehow we need to deal with it." – Floris Alkemade<sup>1</sup>

Though these empty stores are very present in city life, still it is only a symptom of a problem that has deeper roots. For over a century, the use of the city centre has been dictated by commercial activities. Sze Tsung Leong argues shopping has become the defining activity of public life and has methodically encroached on a widening spectrum of territories<sup>2</sup>. This commercialization of space is the product of our global, consumerist culture. We are standing with one foot in this material world, with the other in a digital world. We all struggle to keep up with this culture of constant change, and as individuals try to find our place in it.

context of problem

starting points:

- identity of place
- place attachment
- collective memory

problem statement

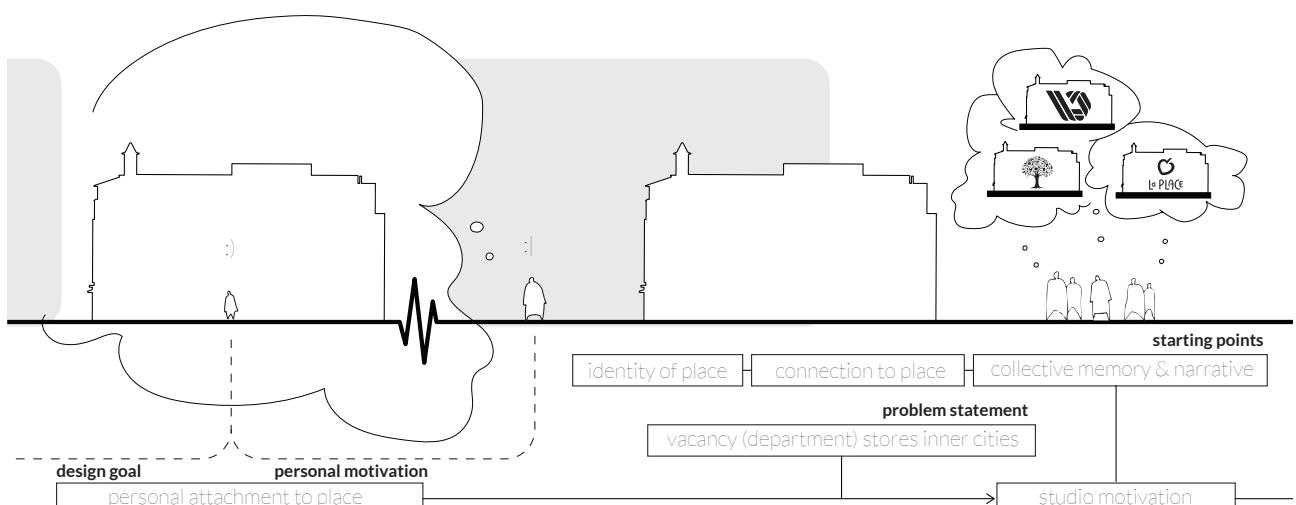
It fascinates me how evident this struggle is represented in the built environment: shopping streets are confronted with the exact same issues as we people do. When I visit my city, my store has disappeared. And with it a sense of belonging, a part of my own identity. The V&D building has become a figure of the past. Not only my past, but a collective past. It shows how cultural memory crystallizes in architecture<sup>3</sup> and how identity of people and identity of space are interrelated. Even though the V&D has left the building, traces of its identity are still visible on the facades. On the streets today, people still refer to building as 'the old V&D'. But as time goes by, this identity is slowly fading. The significance that the place once had, only remains in memories. What does this fading identity mean for the sense of place of the building, for the city and its residents? Is what is left more than an empty shell?

1 Alkemade, F. (2020, 16 maart). *DDW talks | Architecture & Public Space | Floris Alkemade* [Presentation]. Dutch Design Week, Eindhoven, Nederland. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOtNwkdsrk>

2 Chung, Chuihua Judy et al. 2001. Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping. Köln: Taschen

3 Assmann, J. 1. (2006). Form as a mnemonic device: Cultural texts and cultural memory. Performing the Gospel, 67-82.

3 continuous research & design diagram



## Research approach

### research structure

This research is linked to the Vacant Heritage Studio and consists of two components. The first part of the research is done in a group, the second part individually.

The first segment explores the spatial building typology as a basis for re-design. Traditionally, research methods into typologies in architecture base typologies on function. But in an ever changing society, functions also continuously change. This might be most evident in the retail industry, which is in a state of constant evolution. This so-called 'detailhandelsevolutie'<sup>4</sup> is caused by rapidly changing consumer needs, decreasing the lifespan of function.

### spatial building typology

Space, on the other hand, is timeless. Therefore this research uses a different approach to investigate building typologies: instead of functions, the space becomes central. Research is done in order to characterize the spatial characteristics of a collection of buildings. Listing these spatial properties can give direction to the possibilities for redesign and future use. This research is done in a team of 13 students and Hieltje Zijlstra as a research mentor.

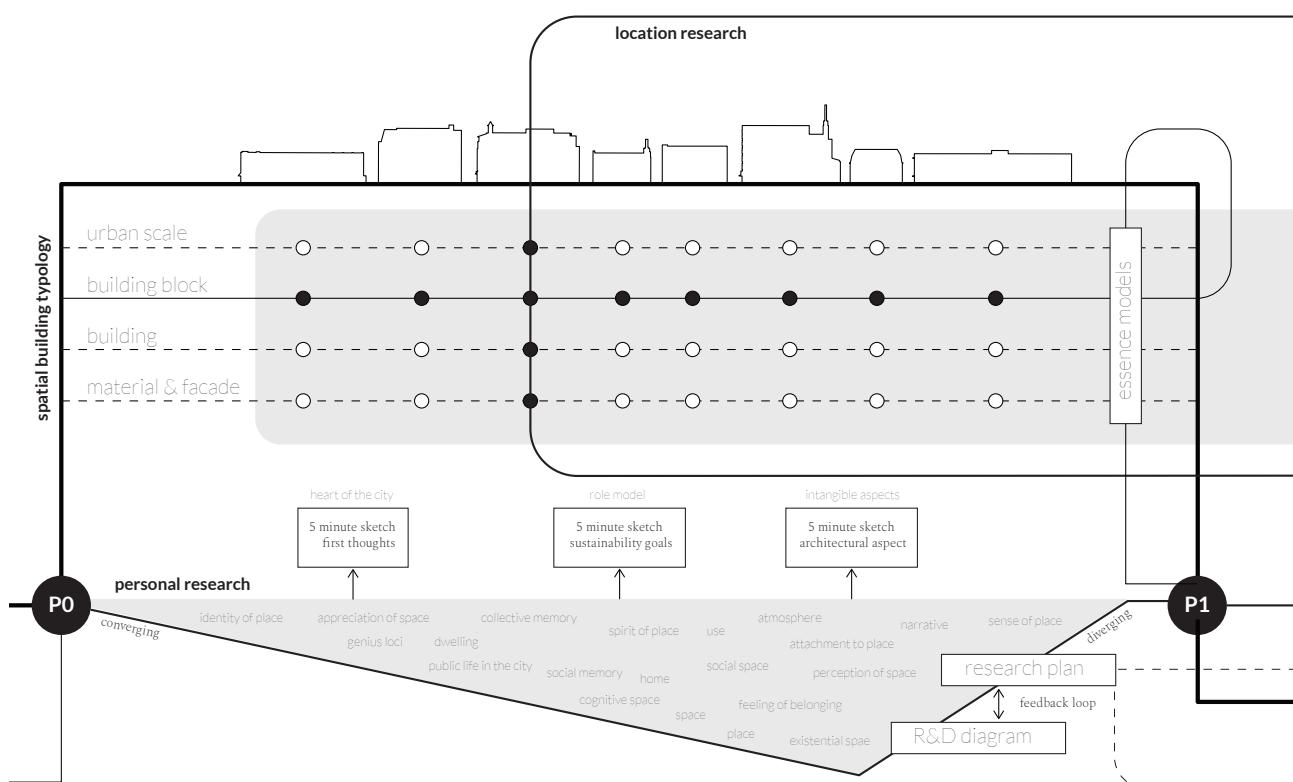
"Architects don't invent anything; they transform reality."

- Alvaro Siza Vieira<sup>5</sup>

### personal motivation

### tangible & intangible values

The second part of the research consists of an individual study based on personal interests. Personally, I have fond memories of the V&D in Leiden. I feel grateful to this building, as my experience here is what inspired me to start my studies in architecture. Seeing this place in its current state of despair is my main motivation for this design project. In 2014 Jan des Bouvrie had made a new design for the interior of this store. This was part of a re-branding strategy, trying to cleanse off the dusty image that the store had acquired over the years. I worked in the restaurant of La Place from the start of this transformation process until the bankruptcy of the V&D in 2016. It was a hectic time, but also a lovely firsthand experience of this building and its qualities. Some qualities are tangible, features such as the marble staircases and large stained glass windows. But other qualities are less tangible. What I remember most of all is the emotional involvement of people to this building.



During the construction work, everybody was curious to check the latest updates. When the construction works were done and the store officially re-opened, it felt like the whole city of Leiden was involved. But soon after, their involvement was not so obvious anymore, as the number of people visiting the store reduced. Until the store closed its door for good.

research goal

Note that it is not my aim to restore the place of the past. The physical V&D shop belongs to the past. Still, for decades the V&D has successfully created a place in the city that people felt connected to. And as we speak, this connection is fading. How accurately can we describe the gap that the V&D has left, other than the loss of function? What is it that remains today, and which qualities are lost? The aim of this research is to discover essential elements of the past place, both tangible and intangible. Understanding the essence of the place in the past is the first step in redesign, as it contributes to the maintenance and restoration of the current place<sup>6</sup>.

positioning as architect

Needless to say, my choice of Leiden as location for redesign was set right from the start. This comes with a potential bias in judgement. In order to distance myself from my personal involvement and study the topic as objectively as possible, I've chosen to zoom out a little. Even though the current identity of this place is strongly imbued with that of the V&D department store, the story of this place does not start with the V&D. And similarly, it does not end with the V&D. Therefore it is important to understand the V&D store as an element in its context over time. The main question of this research is:

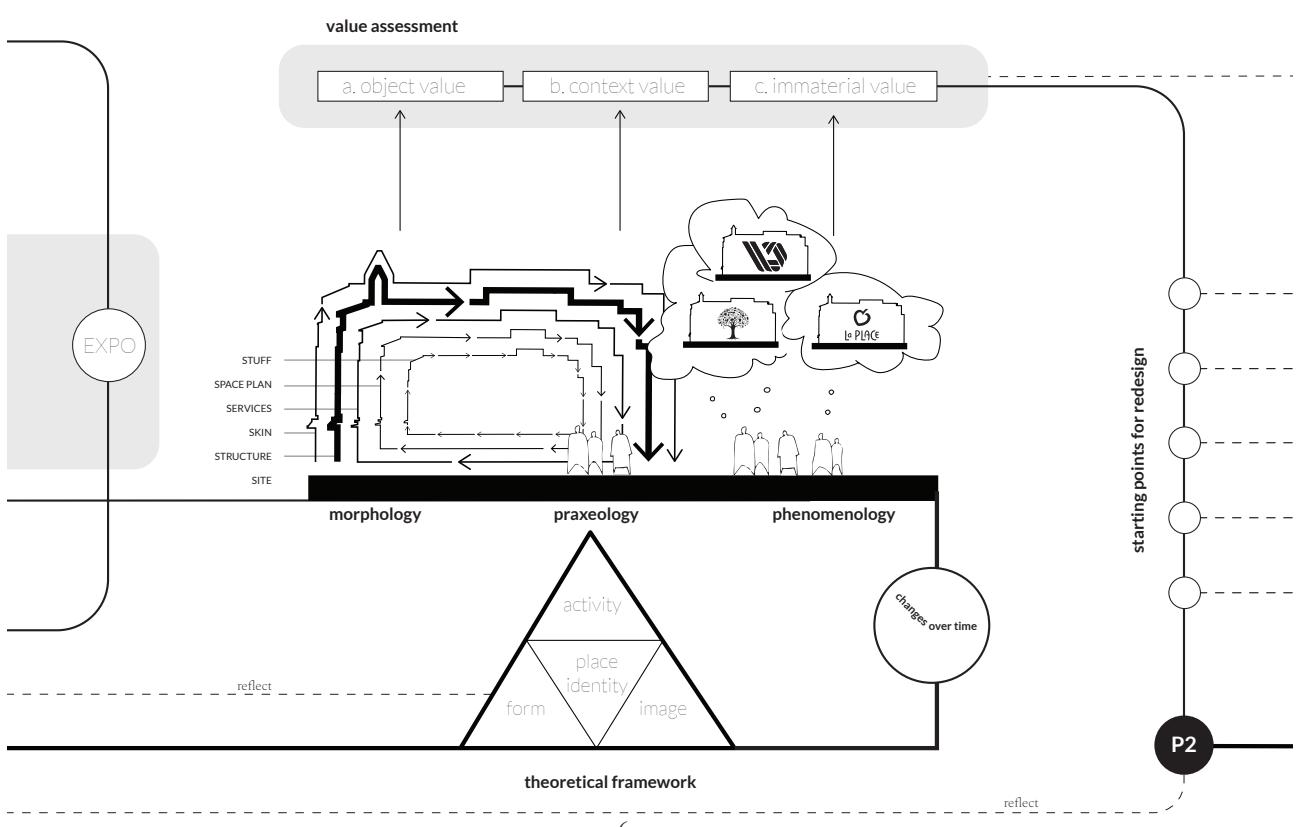
main research question

What is the impact of the V&D department store on the sense of place of the site in relation to the city of Leiden?

4 Hondelink, P., & Otto, R. (2018). *Vroom & Dreesman* [EPUB met digitaal watermerk] (1ste editie). Geraadpleegd van <https://www.kobo.com/nl/nl/ebook/vroom-en-dreesmann>

5 Bouman, O., & Van Toorn, R. (1994). Desperately Seeking Siza. Conversation from The Invisible in Architecture | A conversation with Alvaro Siza Vieira. <https://www.roemervantoorn.nl/Resources/Desperately%20Seeking%20Siza.pdf>

6 Relph, E. (1976). *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion.



# Research questions

subquestion 1 :

What is the sense of place?

theoretical framework

subquestion 2 :

How has the site changed in terms of space since the V&D store?

subquestion 3 :

How has the use of the site changed since the V&D store?

subquestion 4 :

How has the meaning of the place changed over time?

value assessment

starting points redesign

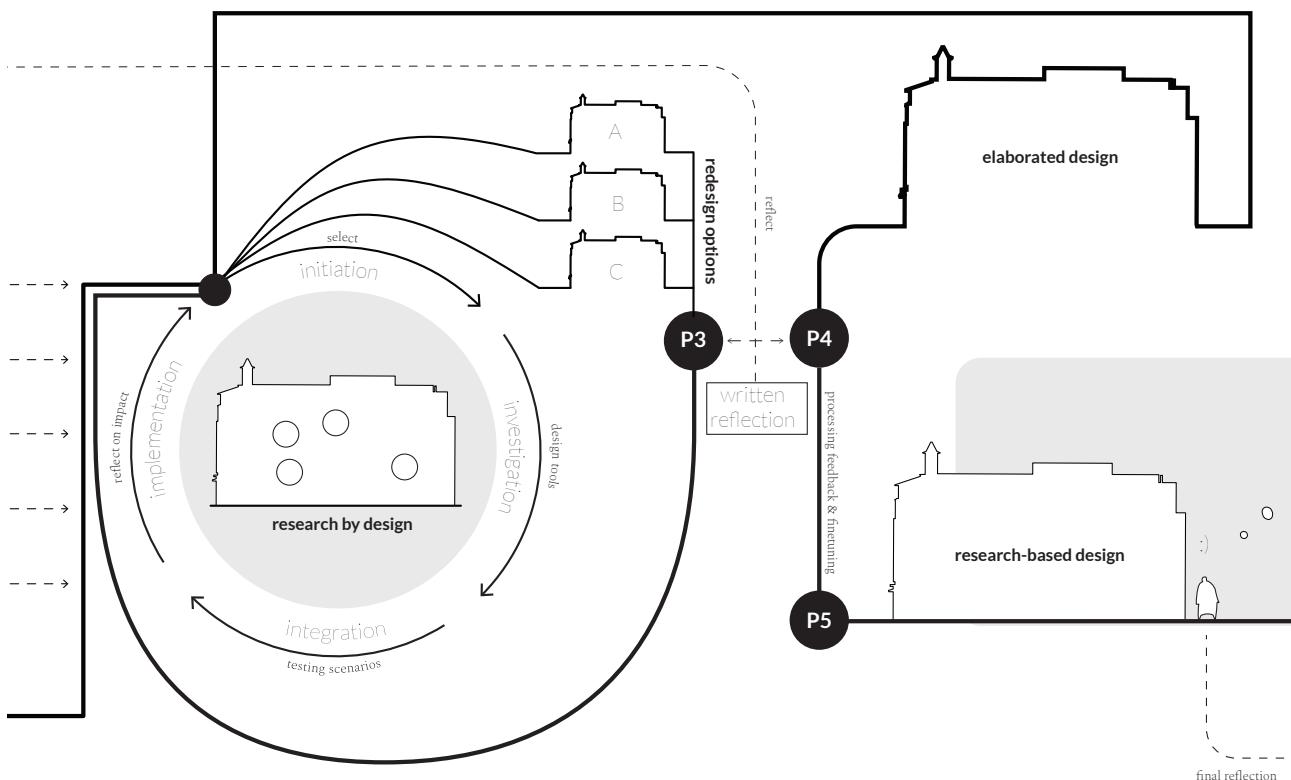
My personal involvement with this building has made me wonder: why do I feel so engaged to the building? What causes place attachment? To answers such questions, it is important to get a grip on the (sense of) place, rather than the research into space alone, which is done with the group. The first chapter elaborates on the concept of place identity and its components. These components result are the topic of study in the chapters that follow. The first chapter thus describes the theoretical framework of this research.

Chapter two examines the first component of place identity: form. The site will be examined in terms of space, how did the V&D store change the physical appearance of the place over time? The results from the group analysis of the spatial building typology are a useful starting point. By comparing this building to other department stores, it is possible to identify features that are characteristic to the typology, and attributes that are more unique to the site. The chapter concludes with a qualitative assesment of material and structural attributes that are present today.

The research continues by exploring the second component of place identity, which is function. It studies routine, rythm and route of people over time. What activities were common, which events were special attractions? And what was the role of the V&D in this?

The fourth chapter explores the changing semanticsc of the place over time. In other words: the meaning or association of the place. This study is based on both formal and informal histories. What is the story behind the building? How did the V&D-brand intend the place to be like, and how was this translated by the architect? What do stories learn us about the experience of the place?

All together these topics result in an understanding of valuable substance (material), valuable structure (morphology) and valuable stories (immaterial aspects). These three key aspects can be developed into an agenda for conservation and intervention, which are translated in starting points for redesign. My aim for this project is to create a place that people again are able to feel connected to.



## Research methodology

value assessment - frame of reference

In order to analyze essential qualities of heritage sites, Kuipers and De Jonge<sup>7</sup> suggest to structure research according to Stephen Brand's shearing layers diagram<sup>8</sup>, consisting of Site, Structure, Skin, Services, Space Plan and Stuff. They argue that a seventh layer should be added to this diagram, which is 'Soul'. This layer represents the intangible elements that a building consists of. In this method, spirit of place corresponds with sense of place or *genius loci*, as all these terms refer to identity or character<sup>9</sup>. Though acknowledging the importance of these intangible values, Kuipers and De Jonge address the lack of a systematic method to capture such findings. The emphasis of this method is still on tangible elements. For my vantage point, the assessment of intangible elements is leading. That's why in the first chapter, the theoretical framework is set following the theoretical configuration of the concept 'sense of place'.

"A great building [...] must begin with the unmeasurable, must go through measurable means when it is being designed and in the end must be unmeasurable." – Louis Kahn<sup>10</sup>

theoretical framework

In order to set out this theoretical framework, my research starts with a literary study. In order to determine a theoretical positioning, this chapter sets out to get familiar with key concepts in the field of phenomenology of architecture. Thoughts of influential architects on the topic of 'space' and 'place' will be studied, as well as their take upon the concept 'sense of place' and 'place identity'. Edward Relph identifies three basic elements that constitute the identity of place, being physical setting (1), activity (2) and meaning (3)<sup>11</sup>. Relph's approach to place identity has been the base of many theoretical conceptualizations to follow<sup>12</sup>. His configuration is used as a guiding structure for this research. The three components correspond to the architectural epistemes of typology/morphology (1), praexology (2) and phenomenology (3). The following chapters can be regarded as an elaborate location analysis, structured on the theoretical configuration of 'sense of place'.

literary study

architectural epistemes

plan analysis

analysis of building history

archival studies

method from the field of literature:

narrative & changing perspective

survey

fieldwork

mapping experience

The second chapter of the research focuses on physical features of the site. It studies the typology and morphology of the site over time. Information from the first semester is used, where the Vacant Heritage team has developed location specific 'loc-docs', guided by the example of Jallon & Napolitano (the so-called Haussmann method)<sup>13</sup>. By means of plan analysis the spatial characteristics of a collection of buildings have been characterized. My personal research complements this research, by adding a historical perspective using data from local archives. The NAI in Rotterdam owns the original drawings of the J.A. van der Laan. By producing reduction drawings of plans, sections and elevations for the historical situation the development over time can be mapped. The layers of Brand<sup>14</sup> is a useful structure to document the physical attributes of a site (see image r&d-diagram).

The following two chapters consist of a study into the intangible aspects. In the analysis of locations, existing local narratives provide insights in the ways places are 'lived', used and remembered by people. People know a place in different ways. As Kevin Lynch describes, the perception of space should be regarded as a sum of perspectives. Creating a pluralist image helps to understand what you can add by means of design<sup>15</sup>. In order to create this image, I need to borrow the eyes of others.

This research sets out to look at the place from many perspectives. Therefore, I will set out a survey, in which people are asked to describe their use and experience of the V&D building in Leiden, past and present. Of course, I also still rely on my own eyes. I will visit the site weekly to get an impression of the current use and experience of the building. Each time, I will plant myself in a different location and write or draw what is happening for half an hour. I will test different methods of mapping this information, both visually as scriptive. Instruments borrowed

mental map

historical study

analyzing archival pictures

expected results

from the field of literature offer a valuable way to become aware of lived space<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, I will ask my fellow students to draw a mental map of the building, after visiting the building. As by this time they've become experts of this building, they know the building very well. Therefore, I set a five minute time limit, forcing the students to reduce the information and only draw the essence of their experience.<sup>13</sup> I will also borrow the eyes of the original architect and client (V&D), and examine their beliefs and design intentions in its cultural-historical context. The book of Hodelink and Otto (2010)<sup>14</sup> and the bibliography of L. van der Laan & J.A. van der Laan<sup>15</sup> are relevant literary studies. Another important source is the image gallery of Erfgoed Leiden, which can be accessed online. It offers a view into historical pictures, maps, and historical newspapers. These stories and images, such as the pictures at the start of this document, offer valuable information about the place as perceived in the past.

In order to draw conclusions about the sense of place, I will produce a series of maps inspired by Jan Rothuizen's Soft Atlas of Amsterdam<sup>16</sup>. In this book, Rothuizen playfully portrays places by the means of handdrawn sketches, based on his own experiences. In these maps, I will summarize and unite the three components of form, function and meaning. Based on my personal experience, as well as the experiences of others, in the past and present. Comparing these drawings can answer my main question: what is the impact of the V&D department store on the sense of place of the site in relation to the city of Leiden?

7 De Jonge, W. & Kuipers, (2017) Designing from Heritage. Strategies for conservation and conversion. TU Delft.

8 Brand, S. (1994). How buildings learn : what happens after they're built. Viking.

9 Ziyaei, M. 2013 Assessment of urban identity through a matrix of cultural landscapes

9 Jallon, B., & Napolitano, U. (2017). Paris Haussmann. Paris: Park Books

11 Lynch, K. (1977). The Image of the City. MIT press.

12 Havik, K. (2014) Urban Literacy. nai010 publishers.

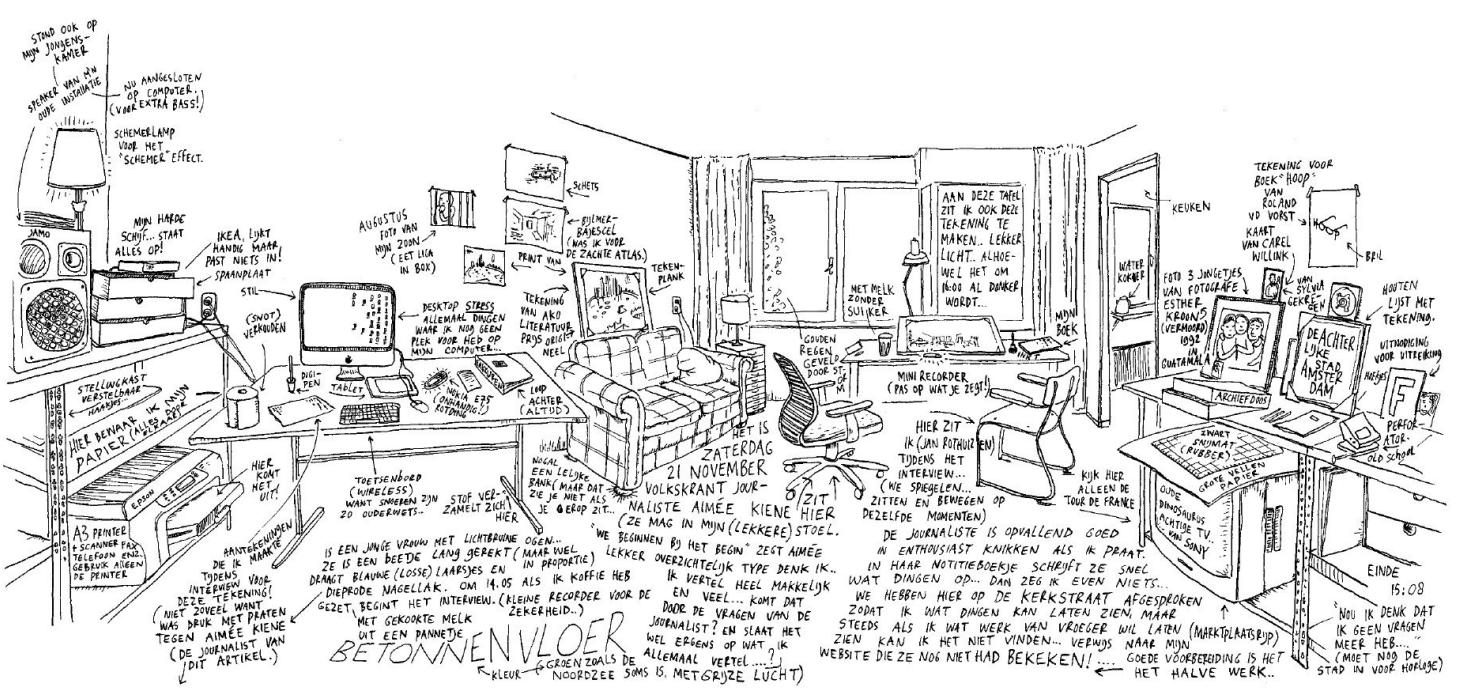
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15 Geneste, D., Gielen, A., Wassenaar, R., Laan, L. van der, & Laan, J. A. van der. (2002). L. van der laan (1864-1942), J.A. van der Laan (1896-1966) : een katholieke architectenfamilie - rechtzinnig, maar veelzijdig en pragmatisch (Ser. Bibliografieën en oeuvrelijsten van nederlandse architecten en stedebouwkundigen). Stichting BONAS.

16 Rothuizen, J. (2009). De zachte atlas van amsterdam. Nieuw Amsterdam.

4 Jan Rothuizen's playful depiction of place



## Relevance

Only a few decades ago, monument care was primarily focused on the conservation of material aspects. Conservational practice today has come to realize the story of a place is as important as the matter.<sup>17</sup> Value is not something determined only by the expert, but largely by the public. The appreciation of a building by the public in itself is something that should be conserved. Simply put: if people like a place, they will take care of it, making a site intrinsically sustainable. Community value is closely linked to personal perception and memory of people and their community, a build object as 'lieux the mémoire'.

But as mentioned earlier, there is a lack in a systematic method to capture such immaterial values. The relation between intangible and tangible values is still rather vague. As architects, we are primarily preoccupied with the physical attributes of a site. With this research, I want to explore what happens when we shift our focus from material matter to the intangible aspect of character and identity. This research might contribute to the development of the missing systematic method for studying intangible values.

Of course, the V&D stores are a wonderful case of study for the building expert. It is a unique typology, using materials and building methods that are characteristic for its age, designed by famous architects. Such tangible values are of importance, but do not tell the full story of the place. An understanding of physical aspects alone does not lead to a true understanding of the place which is needed before architects should start designing. As Relph argues, placemaking starts with a firm understanding of the place of the past. Sense of place is an important condition for people to experience a feeling and an emotion there, and to quite naturally make the area their own. In order for people to feel rooted, to create a feeling of belonging and of attachment.

In the end, the goal of any architect is to create places that people want to dwell in. For decades, the store has managed to create a place that attracted a very broad public. Hondelink calls the V&D 'a mirror of Dutch society'. Even though Dutch society at the time was extremely divided by pillarisation, the store managed to provide a common ground by providing in common needs. Yes, society today is very different and it is more diverse than ever. In the back of my mind is the recent climax of social uncertainty in America, where extreme forms of segregation have caused one nation to live in parallel universes, where there is no more truth and no more talking. A diverse society begs for common ground. Could the place of the former department store again be a place that unites different people? Is there a lesson to learn from the practices of the V&D, or is the context too different?

In any case, the V&D stores are a part of our cultural history. It reflects social cultural values of a society that has been. Studying the evolution and downfall of the store therefore gives insight in shifting values in society. As identity of place and identity of people are intertwined, this research might even teach me something about myself.

<sup>17</sup> Meurs, P. (2016). Heritage based design. TU Delft.

## Ethical issues

Studying this site in times of COVID19 is rather difficult. Is it wise to visit the city of Leiden, when the government asks us to stay inside as much as possible? To travel? In normal times, I'd have loved to engage with people by the means of interviews, asking them on the street about the building, asking them to draw the building by hand. But this pandemic asks for an alternative approach.

Transforming heritage sites brings up another array of ethical questions. First of all, who decides when something is heritage? Who decides what is valuable and what is not? This question is fundamental to my research. My personal judgement-bias has already been discussed before. The starting point of my research is the hypothesis that many residents of Leiden value this building and have precious memories to it. In order to find out how appreciate the building, one thing that I'll do is set out a survey. Doing so, unconsciously I have already excluded the opinion of people that do not have memories to the building. Do those not matter? Furthermore, the selection group that answers my survey, is most probably not a valid representation of all the citizens of Leiden, as it can not possibly reach all people and not all people feel like answering it. That does not mean those people do not have an opinion that matters.

Furthermore, we should be aware that we are intervening in an existing design. Unfortunately, it is not seldom that architects claim a compensation for damages done to their intellectual properties. It is a shame that it should come to this, as I believe communication upfront should be able to avoid such circumstances. But how to deal with this when the original architect is already deceased? Then who do you talk to? How about the neighbours, or people living in the neighbourhood? We can't talk to everybody. Who decides which people to get around the table?

My aim as an architect is that my design contributes to the greater good. I should always aim to offer something more than what the design brief is asking of me. As architects, we transform people's everyday reality. This asks for a level of involvement that is greater than responsibility alone.



5 Visiting the NAI archive

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- local archive Beeldbank Erfgoed Leiden  
/ historic local newspapers (de Leidse Courant, de Leidsche Courant, de Nieuwe Leidsche Courant, Leids Dagblad)  
/ historic photos  
/ interviews
- results from survey, mental maps, observations on site

## Images

cover

CC-O. (1939). Vroom & Dreesmann bij avond [Glasnegatief]. <https://www.erfgoedleiden.nl/collecties/beeldmateriaal/zoeken-in-beeldmateriaal/detail/b80232dc-26bc-11e3-8dcc-3cd92befef8/media/44437c3e-13d9-a50d-bfd7-d3aa503e8c21>

image 1

CC-O. (1974). [Maarsmansteeg 7-19. Gevel van V&D van de Vismarkt naar de Breestraat [foto]]. <https://www.erfgoedleiden.nl/collecties/beeldmateriaal/zoeken-in-beeldmateriaal/detail/110bfafe-26bd-11e3-b2f6-3cd92befef8/media/be15439e-b912-7351-0cbc-2737a431d3d4>

image 2

CC-O. (1964). Maarsmansteeg [Foto]. <https://www.erfgoedleiden.nl/collecties/beeldmateriaal/zoeken-in-beeldmateriaal/detail/e70cf422-26bc-11e3-92ad-3cd92befef8/media/9ff7633a-9999-4321-7d25-54d74530e1dc>

image 3

own diagram

image 4

Rothuizen, J. (2009). De zachte atlas van Amsterdam [afbeelding]. Nieuw Amsterdam. p. 14

image 5

own picture

