

P4 Reflection Paper on Master's Thesis Process - Babette Duijvestein

Graduation Studio

Complex Projects

Graduation Project

CoLab Milan (Collective Laboratory)

The posed problem

In the digital age, public libraries struggle to remain relevant. Once focused on access to knowledge and cultural preservation, they now adapt through technology, online services, and expanded programs. Yet, challenges such as low civic engagement and financial pressure persist. To address this, libraries are evolving into social infrastructures, cultural hubs that unite communities, support cultural exchange, and drive social and economic development.

As modern public libraries, their design must balance two goals: fostering community participation and reaching broader audiences. This involves creating accessible, engaging spaces where transitions between areas encourage debate, curiosity, and connection. My focus lies in how these transitional zones shape both visitor experience and social engagement within a civic hub.

Research Question

How can the architectural design transform a modern library into a civic hub that fosters the activation of communities in Milan?

1. Relation to Master Track and Programme

My graduation project, the design of a modern public library, is deeply connected to the Architecture track within the MSc Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences programme. The project engages with fundamental architectural themes such as public space, identity, heritage, and spatial experience, which are central to both the track and the programme. In particular, it explores the contemporary transformation of the public library into a hybrid civic hub a space that serves not only as a repository of knowledge, but as an active, inclusive environment for collective gathering, creativity, and lifelong learning.

The design responds to the evolving needs of diverse communities by integrating multiple functions for different age groups and social backgrounds, ranging from spaces for children's storytelling and youth workshops to quiet zones for reflection and flexible spaces for exhibitions, performances, or public debate. This multiplicity ensures that the building functions as a shared infrastructure, supporting both personal development and collective gathering.

2. Interaction Between Research and Design

The design evolved from a research-led approach shaped by the ambitions of the Feltrinelli Fondazione Group. Their aim is to create cultural spaces that connect diverse communities and attract a broad, inclusive audience to improve the quality of life. The client's aspiration, the Feltrinelli Group, as well as the municipality, to position the library as a pioneering library that brings diverse communities together formed the foundation of the research direction.

By analyzing contemporary libraries that have successfully redefined their public role, I explored how architecture can facilitate accessibility, cultural programming, and social interaction. Case studies revealed key spatial principles such as openness, hybridity, and adaptability. However, as the design process progressed, it became clear that a truly inclusive library requires more than just flexible space. It also needs carefully tailored environments for different user groups.

Contemporary libraries increasingly emphasize creation, understood as learning through practice, while simultaneously serving as platforms that connect diverse user groups. When spaces tailored to specific audiences are designed to overlap, the likelihood of spontaneous encounters and cross-disciplinary engagement is enhanced. Moreover, by integrating local initiatives such as providing facilities for local creatives, incorporating community gardens, and linking these to workshops and public areas. The role of the library expands beyond creation, fostering a broader transition toward collaboration.

3. Value of My Approach and Methods

During the research phase, we spent a week in Milan to study the city and visit the project site. Experiencing the location made it clear that the current building falls short of the site's potential, acting more as a barrier than a connector between different parts of the city. In addition, we visited several cultural institutions and creative spaces, ranging from studios for cultural workers to initiatives in art, technology, and music, that actively provide platforms for residents. These visits highlighted Milan's ambition to foster public participation and community building, which directly informed the direction of the project.

At first, I struggled to define what a modern library should be while also retaining its existing clients. During the process it became clear, however, that accommodating a commercial enterprise such as Microsoft Offices conflicted with the library's core mission. Involving a stand-alone company within a public space intended to unite diverse communities ultimately undermines this ambition.

Ultimately, moving away from a fixed program and adopting a new perspective on the modern library, one that also incorporates local initiatives, led to a more compelling design development. Mass studies, carried out through a series of physical models, played a crucial role in this process. By carefully defining the boundaries of the site, a more creative and contextually responsive massing strategy could emerge.

In addition, the design process was enriched by studying the approaches of prominent architects who, in various public buildings, also use transitional spaces to bring people together. Just as in the work of Herman Hertzberger, for example in his Centraal Beheer office building. The circulation space is not conceived merely as a zone of transition but is purposefully shaped as a place to stay, enriched with alcoves, seating areas, and sightlines that invite meeting, pause, and interaction. Looking beyond the initial case studies reduced the limitations in my own process and opened up broader design possibilities.

4. Academic and Societal Value

The graduation project carries both academic and societal value. Academically, it contributes to ongoing debates about the evolving role of the public library, showing how architecture can mediate between different communities within the building and stimulate participation. Societally, it positions the library as a cultural hub that fosters creation, collaboration, and

inclusivity, while responding to Milan's ambition for greener urban development. The project is site-specific, yet its principles of adaptive programming, public green spaces, and community integration have broader applicability in other urban contexts. Its implications include redefining libraries as vital social infrastructures that strengthen civic life. Ethically, the design prioritizes accessibility and inclusivity by creating a shared platform for local initiatives and different user groups.

5. Transferability of Results

The design is firmly rooted in the local context of Milan, yet the underlying principles, such as inclusivity, the shift from creation to collaboration, and the integration of public and green spaces are widely transferable to other urban contexts. The value of this transferability lies in the fact that many cities face similar challenges: redefining the role of libraries, strengthening cultural hubs, and addressing the need for greener, more socially inclusive environments.

By exposing the project, the library can also be framed not as a stand-alone institution that merely serves society, but as a shared platform that embodies co-ownership and actively reflects the collective values of the community. This reinforces its position as a societal infrastructure rather than a detached cultural facility.

What limitations or blind spots did you encounter in your research, and how did you address or acknowledge them?

One limitation of the research was the lack of direct user input. Over the past two years, I have been involved as a volunteer at a community center in Rotterdam, where I supported various activities as needed. During this time, I engaged with people of different ages and backgrounds, which provided me with a broader perspective beyond my immediate social circle. This experience also sparked my deeper interest in the topic, as I found personal value in these interactions. However, I was not able to gather enough perspectives directly related to this project and approach, which could have made the design more closely aligned with the needs of specific communities. Especially in the case of Milan, interviewing local residents could have helped to make the library feel more rooted in its neighborhood.

In what ways did the design process challenge or change your own assumptions as a designer?

During the graduation process, I realized how strongly I placed pressure on myself to have everything finished and presentation-ready at an early stage. This tendency often worked against me, as it limited the freedom to explore alternative directions and possibilities. The design process challenged this assumption by showing me the value of experimentation, prioritization, and postponing final decisions until later stages. Towards the end, I began to adopt new methods and approaches to present my ideas and ambitions, moving beyond familiar strategies and allowing myself to take different paths. This experience shifted my perspective as a designer: I learned that leaving space for exploration and iteration can be more productive than striving for perfection too soon.