

**PLACE-MAKING IN AMORPHOUS URBAN FABRIC:  
ACTIVATING THE EXISTING TISSUE THROUGH FOSTERING SOCIAL  
INCLUSIVENESS AND ENGAGEMENT.**

Research Plan  
Marian - Alexandru Comanceanu  
5143101

Tutors:  
Leeke Reinders  
Aleksandar Stanicic

## Introduction

### Problem statement

The theme of this research is derived from the observational and field analysis performed during the initial site visit and during the P1 research. The notion of place, even if sensed in the very beginning, emerged rather gradually and condensed into a relevant topic after its importance became recurrently stressed through interviews, stories, observations.

The site today is actually a building occupying an abnormally large plot for the city centre of Nijmegen. Introvert in its nature and not taking advantage of its surrounding, the building is almost an enclave. Rather amorphous on the urban level, passive and unattractive, failing to resonate with the locals, it neither sparks negative remarks or comments when people refer to it. It is precisely this aspect that was most stringent from all the contradictions that the building encompasses: the fact that, for some reason, it appears to be absent from the collective memory, and despite its size, barely noticed physically. It is therefore a considerably large dysfunctional entity in the city centre of Nijmegen that does not feel as part of the city and does not contribute to its social and cultural context.

### Relevance

Defining characteristic of city centers, the sense of place is currently lacking in the Molenpoort.

The project aims to restore / bring the sense of place to this plot and therefore activate a rather lethargic tissue. It also aims to better integrate this tissue with the larger context, improving its connections, give character to the rather generic space and extend the structure in order to support the added functions.

Programmatically it is a reaction to the programmed destruction of an existing place

- The Honig Complex. It therefore seeks to accommodate partially if not totally, the functions now housed by the disaffected factory once they will lose their location.

On a wider context it also searches to respond to the acute need of affordable housing that the city is currently facing and tries to integrate it with the eclectic mix of functions of the Honig Complex in a harmonious way and by possibly developing a new typology for the city centre.

### Research questions

- What are the components of "place" and how is "place" defined?
- Can "place" only be physically defined, or does it encompass elements of immaterial nature?
- If space can be defined, how can it be created? What are the physical forms that define it or that help defining it?
- Can the idea of space be transposed architecturally or is there a way in which architecture can facilitate place?
- What are the qualities of the existing fabric of the Molenpoort? Are they suited for creation of place?
- How can an alien fabric be tailored to better suit its context?
- What to keep, alter, remove and why?

## Field

Geologically the city is a rather particular entity in the Dutch context, its topography being defined by a series of hills and slopes that even divide the city into Lower and Upper Part. The series of stairs and sloped alleys is a defining threat for the city offering a rich range of vistas and experiences in transiting its spaces. Along with the adjacency to the river they shape its landscape in a remarkably picturesque way.

On a large architectural level, the city as a whole is a perfect example of Bricolage, or more precisely Spolia, continuously reconstructing itself on the remains of the past : eg. The old city wall that later accommodated housing, of which examples can still be found today, The Kerkboog as multiple additions and incorporation of medieval fabric in baroque tissue, The city hall that almost poetically exposed fragments in its courtyard walls etc.

More recently however, the city moves away from this idea and does not necessarily reuse old materials but plays with the illusion of past and embracing the irony of fake by reinterpreting of architectural styles in new buildings or deliberately reconstructing the past with modern means. Examples for those are multiple: an H&M store that incorporates the brand's logo as a coat of arms on the upper level, the new development of the Marikenstraat where the brown and white patterns of the facade panels remind of the Dutch Renaissance or the fake Roman columns of the Moolenstraat Church. While questionable in their intervention they nevertheless offer an insight in how the city tends to treat its past more recently and teaches us preservation and adaptation might be more valuable than artificial reinterpretation.

This change in tendency can be noticed first in the post war period and is accompanied by the demolition of buildings not too severely damaged by bombing and their replacement

with new fabric. The appearance of Molenpoort itself is a consequence of such a demolition and disposal of relevant urban tissue to be replaced with something alien. Now it's own status and relevance in the city centre is questioned and while as a fabric does not provide meaning to the context it is nevertheless a structure that can be appropriated and improved rather than demolished. The question of heritage and its deliberate destruction does not apply here but the one of sustainability do. According to architect Carl Elefante: "the greenest building is the one that is already built"

The decision to further demolish another part of their build heritage (Honig Complex) seems therefore a mistake and the driving ambitions behind do not seem justified if looked at the well functioning of the ensemble on both social and economic plan. Molenpoort project could therefore act as an antidote for such a case, preventing future unjustified demolitions by proving that adaptive reuse can be as beneficial as new built and preventing the gentrification that usually arises from such development schemes.

The current site today is more of a blank canvas, both literally and metaphorically as already mentioned in the introduction. Function wise, apart from the anchor store, few businesses survive and even fewer prosper. Cannibalized probably by the more attractive open air shopping offered few steps away, it is failing a commercial spot.

As a typology, its identity is uncertain and problematic oscillating between the American Mall type - programatically prioritizing car access and relies heavily on the anchor store - and the (Parisian) Passage through its potential of connecting internal fabric of a large scale block to its periphery and existing urban routes.

Its structure however bears the potential of becoming an attractive shopping destination

like the passage if its current function were to be preserved (questionable though in the already commerce over-saturated centre).

Sociologically, research has revealed a vibrant student community attracted by an equally vivid opportunity for leisure, food and socializing that can be found outside the city in the Honig Complex where several creative industries congregated attracted by the affordability of the space, becoming an incubator for local entrepreneurs.

Initially intended as an experiment from which possible future users might already start to know their future residential area, it soon grew as a focal point among the student community of Nijmegen as it provided them the activities the rest of the city failed to.

The future of the complex and its entrepreneurs it currently at stake and concerns have been risen among citizens regarding the loss of such a dynamic and culturally vibrant spot.

Politically, public - private initiatives are defining the built environments resulting in compromises between city's /architects' ambitions and the economic resources of developers.

## Themes and theory

The main focus of this research will be exploration of the notion of place-making which is mentioned in a growing body of literature, its importance being stated by Richard Florida (2004) who argues that "place has become the central organizing unit of our time".

Well accepted as a theoretical construct by many disciplines such as architecture-urbanism, landscape design, ecology or geography, the concept of "place" is however not solely circumscribed to physical-territorial based fields but connected to a variety of humanistic disciplines such as psychology, anthropology or philosophy.

Among the first to theorize the notion of place was Norberg-Schulz in his works "Genius loci : towards a phenomenology of architecture", "Architecture : presence, language and place", "Architecture: meaning and place" with his phenomenological approach.

For Schulz, the argument for place lies in the relation between physical environment and the perceptual and cognitive process therefore in the relation between stimuli and our sensorial apparatus, the physical form directly influencing and determining the perceptual phenomena.

While the physical stimuli and the composition of space clearly play an undeniable role in influencing perception, they are yet insufficient to completely define a "place" as one might expect.

One other relevant contributions to the definitions of the word that I came across so far come from the psychologist David Canter (1977) who describes it as a "unit of experience in within which activities and physical form are amalgamated" and the geographer Edward Relph (1976) who further distinguishes between the physical configurations and activities and the intentions and experience of the people occupying space arguing that the sense of

place lies "in the space's ability to establish relationships with human experiences of existence"

More recent literature on the notion of "place" constantly mention this complex duality implied by the term, more precisely in the nature of stimuli that shapes it. Castello (2010) argues that the perceptual phenomena has two dimensions: one is the perceived stimuli - the ones described by Norberg-Schulz and that are physically defined - and the other, planned stimuli - more intangible in their nature and describing the plurality of activities that shape urbanity (meeting, exchange, leisure, pleasure, mixture, contrast, mingling, comfort, solidarity, diversity). An interesting distinction by Foucault (1997) between hetero-topic plurality and priva-topic plurality and their possible co-existence is worth being mentioned.

Castello further states that " the perception of plurality is in fact one of the greatest qualities sought in plans for new places", argument which is supported by Proshanky, Ittelson and Rivlin (1970) who, however take the other extreme in describing place as only the result of human interactions.

"It should be apparent that at the level of human interaction in any given social setting and for any purpose, the individual responds not to a diffusion of proximal and distal light and sound waves, shapes and structures, objects and spaces but to another person, engaged in a specific activity in a specific place for a specific purpose. Physical settings - simple or complex- evoke complex human responses in the form of feelings, attitudes, values, expectations, and desires, and it is in this sense as well as in their known physical properties that their relationships to human experience and behaviour must be understood" Proshanky, Ittelson and Rivlin (1970)

Diametrically opposing or re-conciliating, those definitions help grasp the meaning or

the spirit of the “place” and disentangle it into its main components: the hard context - and the associated phenomenology, and the soft context - and associated behavioural in relation to public space.

Whilst not trying to give a full definition of the concept as its complexity make it almost impossible, this research intends however to capture the meaning / spirit of the “place” in order to design a place to accommodate a mixed-use programme in the existing non-place constituted by the Molenpoort.

The Hard Context notion therefore will refer to the physical definition of the project while the Soft Context notion to its programme and social climate.

The link between the studio theme - Bricolage - and the notion of place-making is not immediately apparent but it closely relates with the two context issues that I previously addressed, in particular the Soft Context.

While on the material part, Bricolage can be seen as a way of shaping the existing in order to provide the right spatial composition from a phenomenological point of view, on the immaterial part it addresses place-making through the notion of “cloning” (Castello 2010) - recreating from the existing places of Nijmegen, and I refer here to the vibrant community that is inhabiting right now the premises of Honig Complex.

Bricolage is therefore regarded here from the perspective of Levy-Strauss, the bricoleur being “waist-deep in practical situations, being at home between the sensible and intelligible” dealing with what is available at hand and valuing the limited resources available, be them of social or material nature.

Furthermore, Bricolage can also be seen as the ad hocism proposed by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, referring to it as a democratic style in “which everyone could be the author of his own environment” (1972) which in this case, if seen as a way of providing the users a space they can further appropriate, ties back

to the notion of place-making as cultural construction (Tuan 1998) on the psychological level.

## Methodology

### Reading the site:

The collective body of knowledge developed during the P1 constituted a base for reading the city as the wider context of our site: its history, current condition and already future changes. Social investigation identified current tendencies as well the needs arrived from them along with more general recurrent issues on a national level. They constituted therefore the primary base for developing a programme.

The P1.5 research shifted more towards the analysis of the site itself and understanding the peculiarities of its ambiguous typology. An extensive analysis and comparison of Malls and Passages, the two extremes between which the Molenpoort is situated, was done in order to understand why it currently fails as a shopping destinations and to investigate the opportunities of preserving its current functions and possibly better integrating them in the already commercially driven city centre.

The notion of place-making was already central to this analysis and its importance was further emphasized by literature studies later on. The comparison was structured around three main topics - Scale, Function and Perception - that in turn derived the other three subcategories - Atmosphere, Reading, Space Syntax. Through a holistic approach it aimed to understand the construction of such an environment that can be called "place" and derive a possible theoretical model for later application during the next two design semesters.

While the research in the end did not fully justify the implementation of a passage like type on the site, itself being unnatural to its context, it nevertheless outlined certain positive aspects of the passage that became source for inspiration for choosing the future programme as well as spatial organization and dealing with pedestrian flow and bigger urban block.

Following the P1.5 feedback, a wider analysis on the urban context aimed to better understand the characteristic of the fabric the we are dealing with and check whether the label of "porous city" is justified.

Porosity - term describing the voids within the built environment, and the in-between building spaces, the negative space that allows the city to breath. It can be used to understand the relations and dialogues between those buildings as well as the events that can happen there rather than concentrating on the void spaces themselves.

When put in wider context, the porosity defines the permeability of a fabric, in other words the quality of allowing transition and fluidity of movement.

The urban cartography therefore revealed a surprisingly developed system of courtyards that can be further put into categorizes according to their public/private nature and that can serve as a base for "cloning" (Castello 2010) during the Master-Plan process. It aims therefore to work with existing typologies and reinterpret them according to the learning form the previously mentioned comparative study. It confirmed the porous nature of the city and suggested a direction to follow during the urban design weeks.

### Interpretations:

The findings of those empirical studies are currently supplemented by concepts derived form literature and investigate the duality of space / making as two components of place. It takes into account on one hand the physical form and on the other the social aspect playing with the notions of hard and soft context, inherent parts of this concept.

This theoretical approach already revealed some of the manifolds of "place" and is putting in context on site observations. It refines therefore the understanding of this notion and how it can be locally applied.

### Reasoning:

The P2 part aims to combine the Reading and Interpretation in order to derive a programme and the initial urban / architectural form as well as a strategy for Bricolage.

### Making:

This part concerns the following two academic quarters and concentrates on the materialization of the concepts. Initially, a series of models/drawing studies will show how the already mentioned ideas can be transposed architecturally and integrated into context. On one hand is therefore concerned with building the theory and on the other with building the project

Those early design attempts will then be verified against the expertise of the Rotor office during the workshop that is currently scheduled in February. It is expected to reveal the strong and weak points of the design approaches as well as the feasibility of implementing the proposed interventions into the existing fabric.

The work of practices such as Lacton & Vassal, Flores Prats or ADDVT will be used as references when time will require.

