

RESEARCH PLAN

at the faculty of ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT
the 17th of April 2025

PRESENTING

A STAGE FOR SOCIAL LIFE

civil supermarket and community space in the Rembrandt Theatre

A Joëlle Blokhuis production with supervision by Daniel Rosbottom and Amy Thomas

INTERIORS BUILDINGS CITIES - INDEPENDENT GROUP

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*I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me, ...
They replied, "Let us start rebuilding."
So they began this good work.*

Nehemiah 2:18 (NIV)

Welcome to Laak / INTRODUCTION

Design for social interaction

Imagine a crowded café, the bustle of people on the terrace and the murmur of interesting conversations, lures you inside. The atmosphere is inviting. For Richard Sennett, this was the ideal-typical public space; a theatre for the cultural practice of talking with strangers, encountering others without regards to class, race or religion.¹ But is this only the people, or also the building, the location and its architecture? This is what I, as an aspiring architect want to know more about. What role does it play in bringing people together and can it also surpass social borders? Can it invite people to interact, when they were not planning to?

Welcome to Laak 'the forgotten neighbourhood'

Along with my move to the neighbourhood of Laak in The Hague, this began to take shape as a topic of research, somewhat different than initially intended. An incredibly diverse neighbourhood with a big influx of immigrants, both for work as well as with a refugee-background, and only 20% of people with a Dutch background live here.

The neighbourhood was originally built for the working class and lower middle class, based on a design by Berlage, around a hundred years ago.

I started wondering how these different groups live alongside each other and if or how they (could) interact. Each day, cycling from my home to Delft and back, I would pass scenes that would change with the seasons, but would slowly become familiar to me (see cycling route, p.6).

A green and yellow café, boasting the colours of the city, with only dutch locals frequenting the place: On evenings I could see the patrons enjoying a beer and a card game. A similar scene played out in a Turkish café: Here men of a similar age, but a different skin colour were enjoying the same card game.

I visited some of the community centres, which were all pleasant spaces and with five in the neighbourhood, this would seem to be enough. However, most were not reaching the full spectrum of people in the neighbourhood.



My house, the former 'Haags tehuis voor ongehuwde heren' (Home for unmarried men)

Rembrandt Theater

Not so much later, I found out that the supermarket I always cycle past, on one of the bigger squares, the Lorentzplein, was built as a cinema in the 1930s. Named Rembrandt Theater or Lorentztheater, the foyer faced the square and the cinema hall was located behind the surrounding housing.



Rembrandt Theater, Lorentzplein 1933 (source: pinterest.com)



Backside Supermarket, Minckelerstraat, 1981 (source: Haags Gemeentearchief)



Interior Rembrandt Theater, from balcony, 1933 (source: Juffrouw Jo, flickr.com)

Now, the balcony still remains, hidden behind the suspended ceiling. As a supermarket, the building is visited day in, day out. A public site, ready for a more social function?

1. Boomkens, 'The Temporalities of the Public Sphere'.



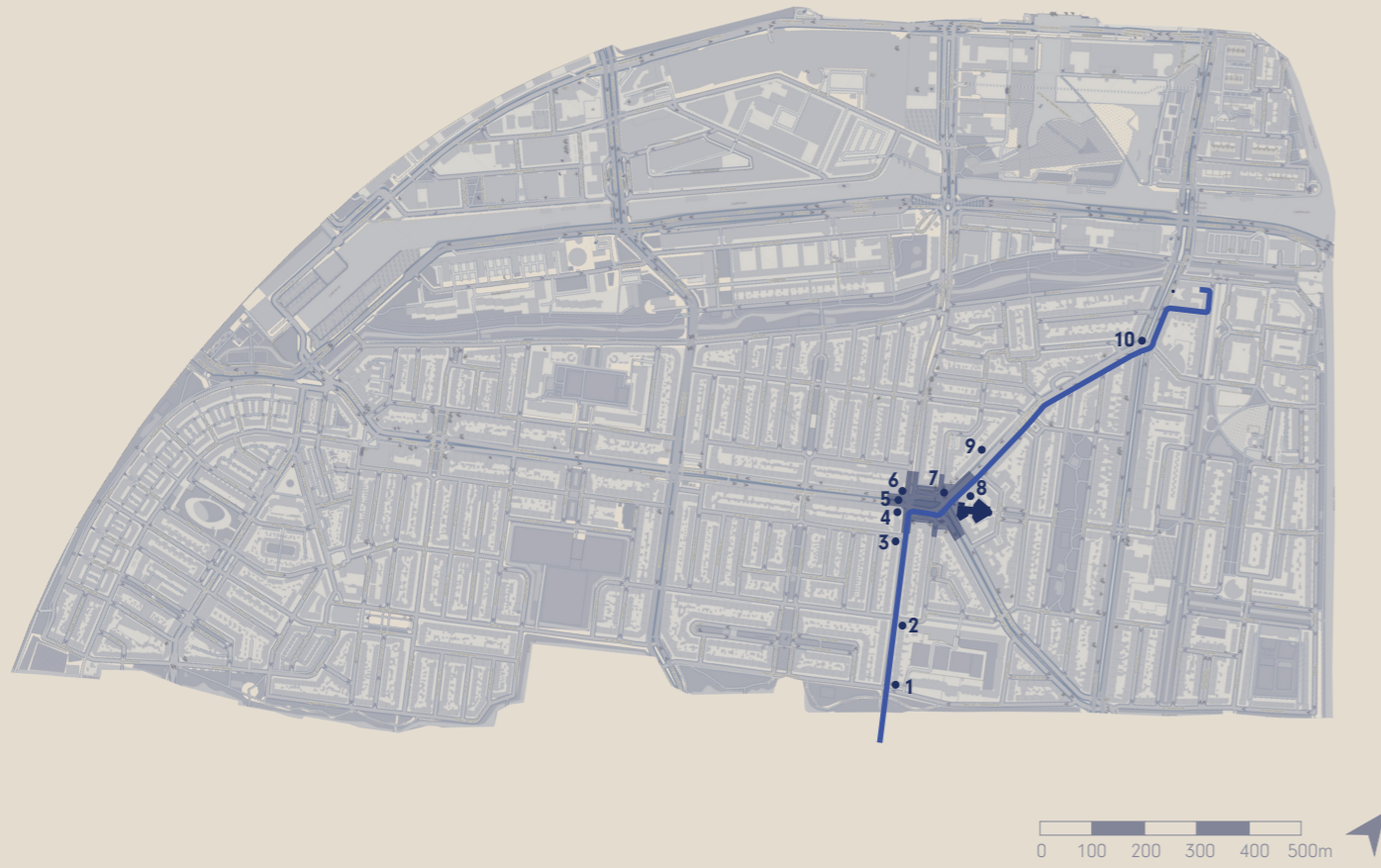
Albert Heijn, Lorentzplein, 2025



Backside Supermarket, Minckelaarsstraat 2018 (source: Google Maps)



Balcony and suspended ceiling Albert Heijn, 2008 (source: Marc Tangel, haagsemarc.nl)



My cycling route through Laak, illustrated. Rembrandt Theater and Lorentzplein are shaded.



5. Goeverneurlaan



6. Monumental architecture Goeverneurlaan-Lorentzplein



1. Leo's koffiehuis, Oudemansstraat



3. Sam Supermarket, Oudemansstraat



7. Empty snackbar and Greek restaurant, Lorentzplein



9. Second-hand store, Van Musschenbroekstraat



2. Milan market, Oudemansstraat



4. Cafe New Eldorado, Lorentzplein



8. Grocery, Van Musschenbroekstraat



10. Intersection Van Musschenbroekstraat - Rijswijkseweg

Architecture of communities / ACADEMIC POSITION

“Architecture can’t force people to connect; it can only plan the crossing points, remove barriers and make the meeting places useful and attractive” - Denise Scott Brown²

Architecture as connector

As an architect, I want to be socially responsible. I want to create sustainable places, both in terms of materiality but most of all in the sense of longevity and usefulness. For this I have looked at what both architects and sociologists say about buildings and spaces that connect. How good design can be the foundation for community and create a sense of belonging.

Social Infrastructure

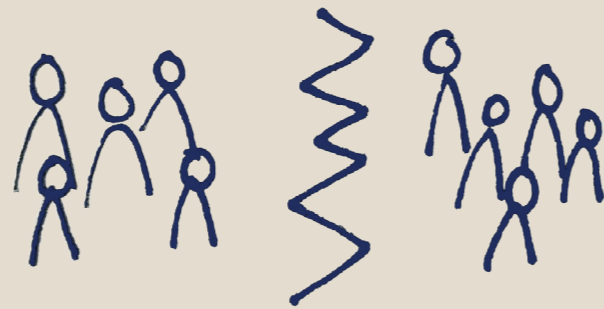
To describe both the physical places but also the organisations that shape the way people interact, Eric Klinenberg coins the term: ‘Social infrastructure’ in his book Palaces for the People.³ He describes the vast variety of spaces and institutions that can belong to this social infrastructure: Libraries, schools, playgrounds, parks, sports fields, pools, sidewalks, courtyards, community gardens, community centres, churches and other civic associations. But also third spaces,⁴ such as cafes, diners, barbers and bookshops, especially if these latter spaces allow one to linger.

The invitation to come in

And what brings people to these places? As Denise Scott Brown mentions, the medieval towns started with a marketplace at a crossroads. This is the place where people come across each other and where one wants to be, when looking for connection.⁵ Specific buildings have a reason people go there, schools and supermarkets, as well as sports centres. But a space such as a library or a café could also be a space a passerby might be brought into, without originally planning to do so.

Social barriers

On the other side, buildings can also keep people out. Among the Dutch population there is a sense of increased polarisation. This creates we-they-thinking and with a relatively large sense of friction between ethnical groups in the Netherlands, social barriers are formed between different groups.⁶ In Laak, this is visible in the spaces where people come together, within mainly their own groups.



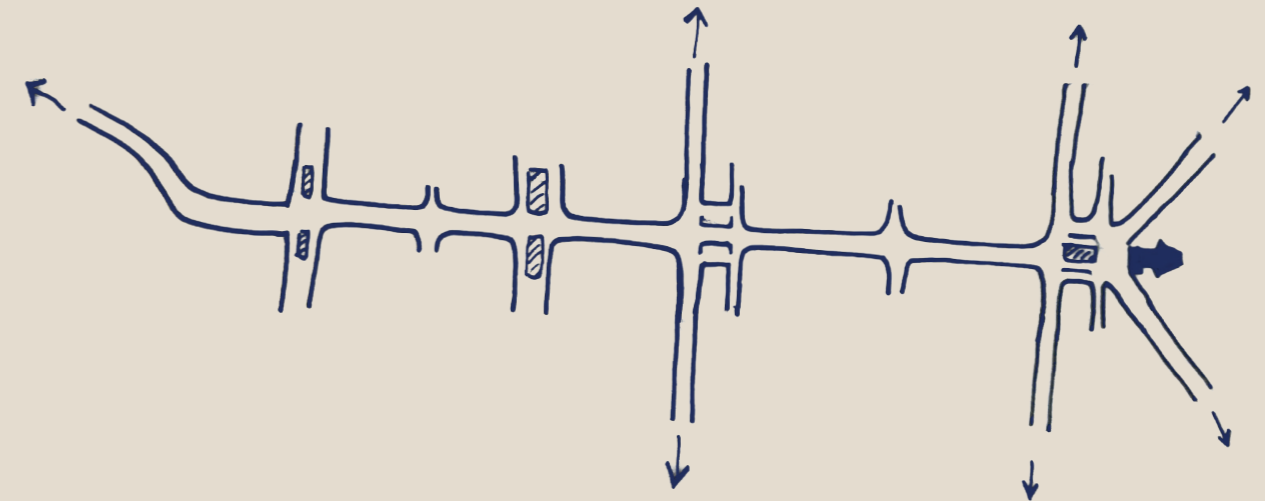
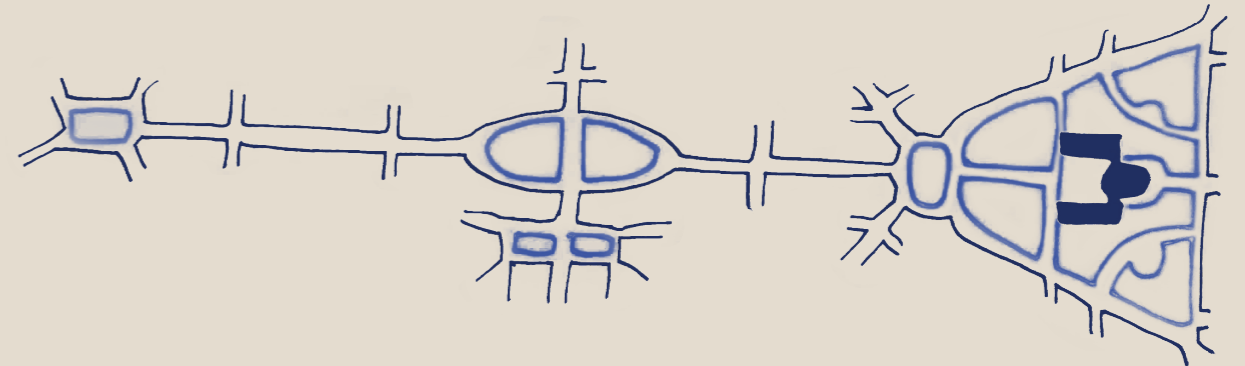
There is a perception of increased polarisation in the Netherlands, although general opinions are not so different.⁶ Hertzberger summarises: “Community as idea has lost to the thought of protecting oneself against others.”⁷ These barriers can physically show up as walled communities, but also through lack of investment in neighbourhood amenities, and so, a lack of people in the public realm.⁸ Fortunately, this is not yet the case in Laak, although people seem to live besides each other, opposed to with each other.

City as collective memory

These different groups share the same environment. They live within a space of connected history, through memories the buildings around them hold, as Aldo Rossi⁹ argues. In Laak, many residents regrettably mention the sense of degradation, “it used to be a chic neighbourhood”.^{10,11} By focussing on the history of the neighbourhood, both through Berlage’s plan and his social-cultural intentions, as well as through the history of the Rembrandt Theater and the supermarket on the Lorentzplein, there is space for this history to instill a renewed sense of pride and connection for the residents of Laak.

Square as centre of society

The placement of the Lorentzplein can be traced back to Berlage’s expansion plan for The Hague, although the realisation is much smaller than Berlage’s grand plan (side by side on right page). Located at the end of the Gouverneurlaan, the central axis through Laak, it was planned to be a meeting space for commercial and cultural functions, with Berlage’s intention for a representative cultural building at its end.¹²



Berlage plan (above) and current situation of Gouverneurlaan and Lorentzplein (on right edge, with theatre).

Throughout the years, the square has become more and more traffic oriented, although the centre part of the square was mostly green to look at and not green to stay in.¹³

Nowadays, multiple traffic streams cut up the square, which is still one of the main commercial hubs of the area, although it is not a space where one can easily and comfortably stay. One of the restaurants has space for a terrace and often some people can be found sitting here. In front of the old Rembrandt Theater, the present-day supermarket, two benches are frequently occupied, but no other space is offered to the passersby and people-watchers.



Lorentzplein, 1922 (source: Gemeente Den Haag)



Lorentzplein, 2025 - traffic junction

Theatre as cultural history

Following Berlage's ideology of the city as the epitome of human culture, the square should be connected to representative institutions, i.e. cultural spaces. In the 1930s, movie theatres, were the most popular form. Every major town had at least one,¹⁴ and The Hague had 25 theaters in the city.¹⁵ So, the Rembrandt Theater, or Lorentztheater, came to exist. Showing films up until the 1960s, the theatre saw its fair share of people entering and being amazed by what the screen could show.

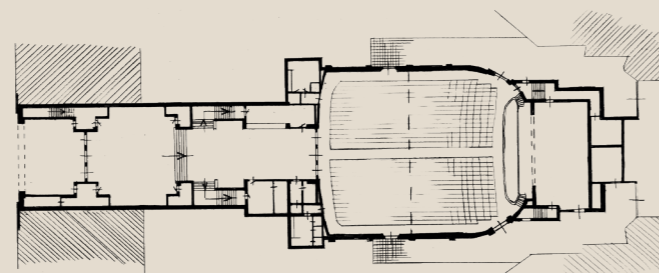
As a four-year-old boy, we went to the theatre as a family outing. When the lights went out, and on the screen a train came our way, I dove below the chairs: "Mommy, come quickly, or you'll end up under the train!"
- Ed Ploeg

I could be found at the theatre practically every week, for the half one showing, then we'd help sweep up the room, and we would be allowed to stay for the next film!"
- Henk van der Kleij¹⁶

The cinemas saw their downfall with the introduction and the affordability of the television in the 1960s. While still able to offer a sociable alternative for escaping the home for the youth and coloured films, the decline of cinema visits set in.

Supermarket as occupier

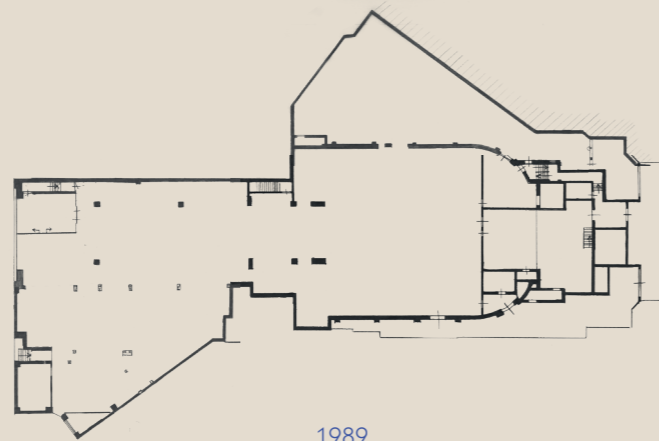
Soon after the departure of the theatre, the Albert Heijn arrived in Laak. Locating itself on two ends of the Goeverneurlaan, local businesses lost to the supermarket¹⁷ that could supply both vegetables and meats, among many other products. Taking over the theatre, the supermarket had a narrow and deep layout, and the balcony was hidden behind a suspended ceiling. Throughout the years more and more space was needed, so a storage was built, the next-door venues were annexed, and another wing was added to provide a larger assortment of products (see development on the right).



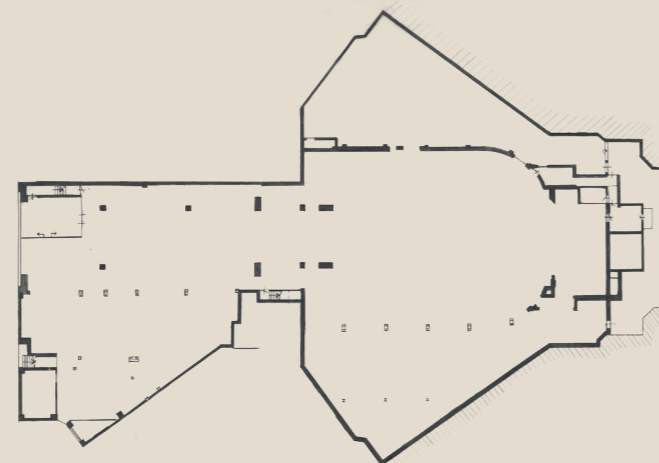
1933



1968



1989



2007

Nowadays, there are many small convenience stores in Laak, representing the various cultures. Apparently, the Dutch supermarkets don't supply what the public requires, or do they purposefully leave space for competition?

Generally, supermarkets are focused on profit, and not so much on offering extra unpaid services, although exceptions exist. Jumbo Monique, franchise stores in Alkmaar and Noord-Holland, offer a sitting space that can be used by customers, but also by passers-by. This is something Monique Ravenstijn, the entrepreneur behind these supermarkets, wants to give back to the community¹⁸. Is this the future for supermarkets? Offering a place for people to come, shop and stay?

Involvement

Like many supermarkets, not everyone sees value in the unprofitable extra, especially because positive results of community cannot be easily quantified, although there are great examples of community-involvement leading to better health and happier lives.¹⁹ Eric Klinenberg confirms this: when involvement is encouraged, communities grow.²⁰ In Laak, involvement in the community becomes greater when people are the homeowners, Mieke Wytema, project manager of the action plan for Laak, mentioned.²¹ In the neighbourhood starters are able to afford houses that come up for sale, who become responsible for the care of the house and garden or street. Simultaneously she sees these people being involved within the community. Methods of involvement could be within the community centres, as many people already do.

One of the big barriers for connecting here, is also the lack of a collective language. Many people know little or no Dutch nor English. Activities based on neither of these languages or a connection between languages might be helpful. Augusto Boal mentions the richness that knowing various languages brings, a richness that could flourish in Laak: "by learning a new language, a person acquires a new way of knowing reality and of passing that knowledge on to others."²²

Architect's tools

The language of the architect then is to speak through drawings, and buildings and create a new reality which can be passed on to others. Hertzberger describes the use of barriers, to create connection. By using the correct scale for walls, steps, elevations, and plateaus, spaces of separation and concentration are created (see below).²³

Additionally, Hertzberger implores to create spaces that can and may be appropriated: Giving people the power and space to celebrate life. Besides the building and design tools, the architect has at hand the task of intermediary, bringing together opinions of users, developers and other stakeholders, such as the municipality. Through both architectural language and the languages of each of these involved, the architect can start creating a transformed reality. Considering the building of the Rembrandt Theater, here lies the possibility for me to use these skills and hone them and find the spatial qualities and highlight them, to set the stage for the social life of Laak. Tamas, 'Interview: Robert Venturi & Denise

interaction - no interaction - interaction



but still a sense of 'own' space



sense of separation, interact when want to.

Herman Hertzberger on creating barriers to facilitate interaction.

2. Tamas, 'Interview: Robert Venturi & Denise Scott Brown'.
3. Klinenberg, Palaces for the People, 5.
4. Oldenburg, The Great Good Place.
5. Tamas, 'Interview: Robert Venturi & Denise Scott Brown'.
6. 'Hoe Gepolariseerd Is Nederland? | Nederlands Jeugdinstituut'.
7. Brinkgreve, De ruimte van Herman Hertzberger, 89.
8. Klinenberg, Palaces for the People.
9. Rossi et al., The Architecture of the City.
10. Sevenstern, 'Louise Roeleveld over wonen in Laak, vroeger en nu'.
11. '100 dagen in de vergeten wijk'.
12. Verbeek and Berlage, Berlage in den Haag = Berlage in The Hague.
13. Gemeente Den Haag, 'Voorontwerp Van Musschenbroekstraat & Lorentzplein'.
14. Atwell, Cathedrals of the Movies.
16. Mutsaers, 'Filmatelierdenhaag.NL :: 2. Brede Keuze'.
17. Tangel, 'Rembrandt Theater Als Schilderachtig Decor van Filmfestival'.
18. Sevenstern, 'Louise Roeleveld over wonen in Laak, vroeger en nu'.
19. Ravenstijn, 'Missie en Visie'.
20. Waldinger and Schulz, The Good Life.
21. Klinenberg, Palaces for the People.
22. {Interview with Mieke Wytema, project manager of Action Plan Laak, 18th of March 2025}
23. Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed.
24. Brinkgreve, De ruimte van Herman Hertzberger.

How can the re-imagination of the Rembrandt Theater, considering its historical function and current use, set the stage for interaction between the multicultural people of Laak?

To bring together my interests and respond to the question of a meeting space, as well as re-instill a sense of local pride for the inhabitants of Laak, I will take the former Rembrandt Theater building as project, along with the square in front of it. I will look at ways to revalue the theatre, as space, and how to add community value to the building and the square. This will take in account the historical function – the cinema, and regard what a more civil functioning supermarket could mean for the interaction of the neighbourhood's residents.

Lorentzplein as space for people

How can the square, now dominated by traffic, become more people oriented? It is also worth thinking about the stream of passersby, how can they be invited to stay and come inside? What programme might be added to the square to create a stage for the people, and make it a gathering or performing space? What was Berlage's intentions and ideology, how do other squares in the city function and could these be of importance for Laak?

Cinema as a collective, cultural space

What is the cultural importance of the cinema-theatre for the neighbourhood? Many citizens of Laak seem to know of the cinema function the building used to have. What was its importance in the past, before the cinema's decline in the 1960s, and what could a cultural – cinema – function be in the future? Is the neighbourhood ready for its comeback? A cultural function might lead to a sense of pride for the people, a place people can take their friends and meet their neighbours. It can focus on social topics that play within the various communities and bring these to the table for others.

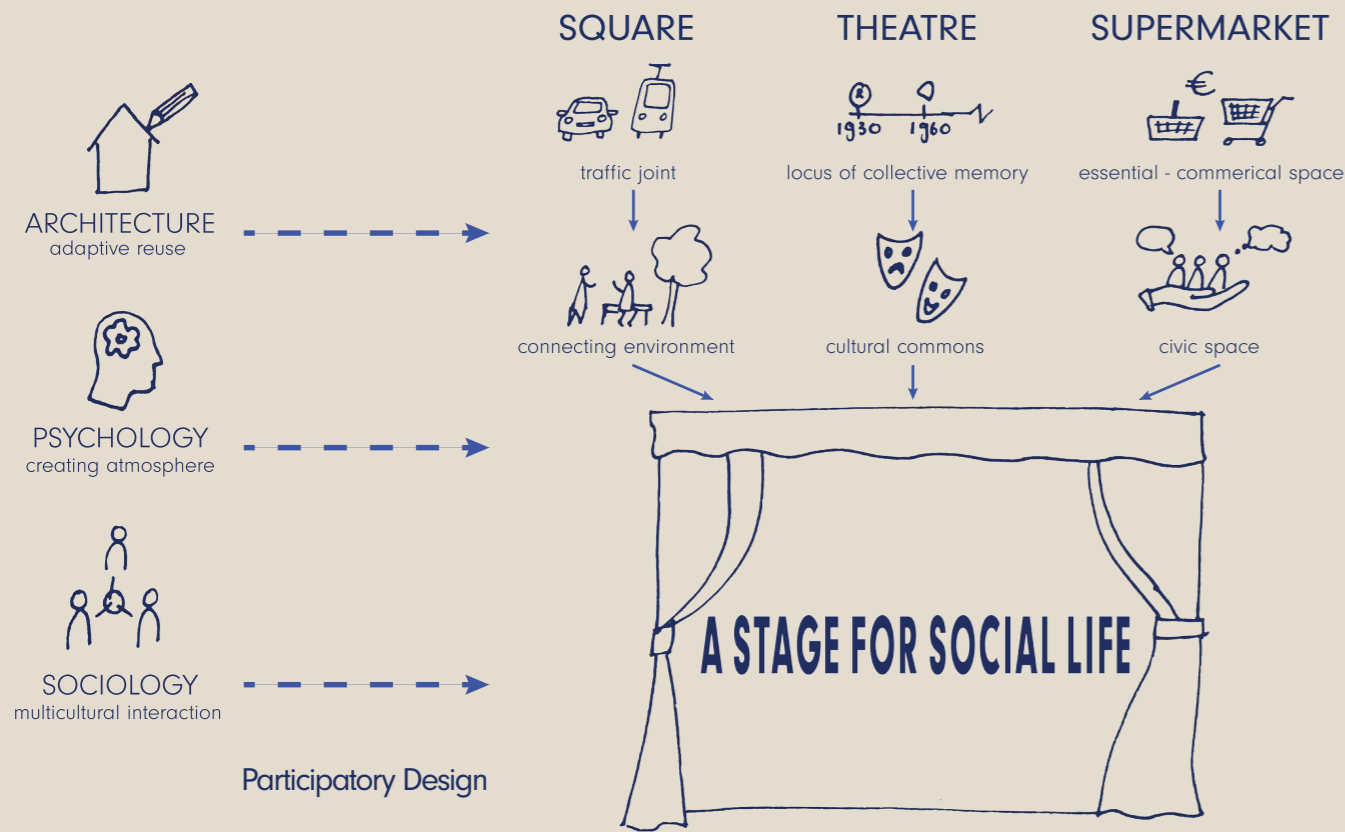
From non-space to civil supermarket

How can the supermarket benefit from a civil function and add to the social cohesion of the neighbourhood? The supermarket hosts many people daily but has little spatial qualities. How can the people inside be invited to stay through additional functions. For this it is relevant to understand how the supermarket works and organises its space. What programme can be proposed that overlaps?



Collage: Lorentzplein as square for the people

How to get there / METHODOLOGY



Research Diagram

As I am a resident of Laak myself, my position is that of a participant observer. I get to live in my research area each day and this will help me experience life here as much as any other inhabitant. Besides this position I aim to look through the perspective of environmental psychology - how does the built environment interact with people and lead people to interact.

Through literature on architecture, psychology and sociology, referential research as well as by learning from experts (architects, supermarket managers and community-centred people in Laak), and through my experience living here, along with that of my neighbours, I hope to find out who make Laak, how Laak works outside and within the supermarket and community spaces and use all of this to develop my project.

The fields I will look at can be narrowed down to three overarching forms of spaces: The square, the theatre and the supermarket, which I will

revalue through perspectives of architecture and psychology, as well as sociology. Working through these perspectives I will keep in touch with locals and users, through conversations with residents and shoppers, in the community centres, on the square and in the supermarket.

Epistemes: Typology, praxeology

A Stage for Social Life / DESIGN AMBITIONS

I would like for the old generation to find renewed pride in a place that might hold nostalgic memories, the allochthonous residents to find an invitation to learn about the history of the place they now find themselves and the whole district to be proud of a cultural centre that invites not only the residents, for local meetings and their weekly or daily supermarket visits, but also stands out to the city with occasional larger events, showing the rest of the Hague that Laak may no longer be the 'bad neighbourhood' they have considered it to be. But most of all I want to create a place for the people of Laak to come together and meet one another, to learn from each other's cultures and grow to appreciate one another.

I aim to do this by creating a connecting urban environment from the Lorentzplein, which will then also bring people inside the supermarket-theatre. The theatre will build on its history, forming a new common cultural space, including a cinema space. Integrated with this cultural, social space, the supermarket will also offer space for social initiatives and become a space that not only offers goods, but also offers good to the community.

SPACE TO GROW



CULTURAL ACTIVITIES



Design Proposal P1: social spaces that inspire and make space for cultural connections, above, around and in the supermarket

end credits / BIBLIOGRAPHY

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