

THE NEW LEISURE.
INVESTIGATION OF THE SOCIO-SPATIAL RELATION-
SHIPS IN THE CITY

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Research Plan_ AR3A010

INTRO

One day, working in the architecture practice I used to collaborate with, I froze in front of the screen. One of my directors, who was sitting next to me, had taken notice and asked me what was happening. I was thinking about what was I doing there, sitting comfortably in an office drafting beautiful drawings, while outside climate change and ecological catastrophe silently threaten our existence and people suffer as a consequence. I was questioning my role within the colossal effort that is required by us all and started questioning if architecture matters at all, if it has any importance within the bigger picture. What my director replied when I explained to her the crisis I was undergoing, is possibly the reason why I am writing this today and why I am at this university studying to become an Architect. Her reply was: "It is exactly because you have this awareness, that you should continue in this field and become an architect". By choosing studio Bricolage and Urban Architecture, I endeavour to explore ways of designing architecture which responds to the needs of people but also those of the environment. The theme of bricolage, as means of investigation of ecology, the attitude of "make do, will do" and the act of assemblage, a reminder of where materials come from, has the potential to become a base for future practice.



Giuseppe Penone, 12 meter tree, 1970.

It is the architect's duty to raise awareness that resources are finite and to promote circularity, also in a social and economic sense.

Opportunities for engagement and awareness of the human being a social entity; one that necessarily needs to live in community and relationship with other human beings, and in symbiosis with nature and its cycles. A critique of shopping as the ultimate manifesto of immediate consumption and individuality, and acknowledging that humans are still very much attached to their more profound needs of community building and connection to the natural world.

"It's not the architecture that makes a statement for the public, it's architects that make it when things are made a certain way"

Irénée Scalbert & óa Architects, Never Modern, 2013

The site for the project is the starting point of the research, and I associated with the idea of the “wreck” of a previous “civilisation” (= need), similarly to the shipwreck in Robinson Crusoe’s narration. The Molenpoort shopping mall represents both a problem and a solution. Its concept is outdated, and its shops are for the majority vacant. Though being centrally located within the city, next to a heritage site and at a pedestrian gateway to the city centre, it is underused and hidden, and even though its mass is vast, it serves one purpose only: shopping. The Molenpoort is so outdated that even the residents of Nijmegen see it as a blind spot in the city. On an urban scale, the two-floor building covers the whole area of the vast site, neglecting both its immediate and urban contexts, which are characterised by smaller-scale buildings connected by small, meandering streets and public squares. In both programme and scale, the Molenpoort feels disconnected to the city and the needs of its inhabitants.

As shopping malls become an outdated reflection of consumerism, and the web makes shopping online a commodity, what do people do in their free time?



Screenshot from the P1 film of group 4, “Shop (till you) drop? Drop Shopping?”

This question sparked an interest in the analysis of what acts represent leisure in the city, questioning the status quo and embracing the suggestion for a different type of leisure, public life and social engagement. These notions take me to question the role of the architect in the social realm: how can an architect design a “stage set” for life to unfold, giving the floor to the people, and taking a step back? If the aim is to showcase life with its unexpected, comedic, roughness and carnality, celebrating the improvised and tolerating human appropriation and adaptation then, perhaps, drawing scenarios for everyday activity, and showing human activity rather than a fixed architecture, seems appropriate for the task.



Piero di Cosimo, Construction of a Building, ca 1480

FIELD

bodily changes harm or heal
bricolage implies some sort of project
buildings-inhabitants-builders
Nijmegen is a lifestyle
very big village
we live like a family
everything is so close
squatting is a way to become active
the Waal
this is close to paradise
seeing and being seen
landscape
monuments are equalised in the personal experience
an extraordinary liveliness one cannot expect from architects
it's historical, small scale
passers-by are not buyers

Extract from the movie screening round up, "echo" by Paul Vermeulen

When initiating the project on an urban scale, I see of great importance to analyse not only the site in architectural terms but getting to know the communities and the socio-cultural aspects of a place. My very first interest lied in uncovering who are the people living in the city of Nijmegen, what they do and where they go. Our body of social research has developed organically by visiting the site and talking to locals about their stories, lives, and connections to the city. We explored Nijmegen's scenes, subcultures, turfs and territories by engaging with the residents, and uncovered and discovered the city from a very different perspective from how architecture students are accustomed. I firmly believe that good architecture stems from the understanding of its ultimate stakeholder, which are people. The richness of people's stories, cultures, beliefs and needs are what I strive to always have in mind when I dive into a project.

Our attempt at gaining a holistic understanding of the culture took us to take a step back, and allow the residents to show us the city through their eyes. We investigated and explored the personal landmarks of the people living the city, as opposed to the tourist or cultural hotspots (such as Stevenskerk and the Roman ruins). The synopsis for our movie read: "The city is not only made from the physical space surrounding us. It sets the stage for the play we are all participating in: "life". To understand a place thoroughly, we should not only look at the buildings themselves but try to get a glimpse of the memories, stories, and experiences of ordinary life. In his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau wrote: "The city is provisionally created as a patchwork quilt of individual viewpoints and opinions". We have to look at the intangible soul of the city to understand why a place is as it is. By doing this, we realised that landmarks are equalised in the human experience and that places such as the everyday café, the local barbers, the organic shop and the jazz bar were the type of places that make the daily lives of the people living in the city. This process took us to the rediscovery of the ordinary, finding value in everyday actions and routines. It also brought us to the consciousness that people use a space and adapt it to their own needs, that the taste of the architecturally untrained eye does not always agree with that of architects (generally).

“humans use buildings in opportunistic ways.”

Irénée Scalbert & 6a Architects, *Never Modern*, 2013

From the fieldwork, the image of Nijmegen as a “big village” emerged, a place where people feel part of a community and they know their neighbours, expressing a level of care and openness towards others. “Freedom”, “progressive”, “accepting” are terms that came up often when in conversation, and people referred to them also concerning the leftist political scenario Nijmegen is recognised for, and the anarchist and squatters movements of the ‘70s.

Investigating the local complexities and the juxtaposition of life and urban fabric, we studied that the “nooks and crannies” (Joliene, 2020), the parks, the corners, the meandering alleyways, the small scale of shops, cafés and streets are seen as valued configurations and elements of the urban texture. Conferring a feeling of both openness and human scale, which is also why the town is described as “a city of cafés, not a city of big discotheques”. (Wido, 2020)



Screenshots from the movie made by group 3 and myself, “Nijmegen through your eyes”

Trough the fieldwork, I was fascinated by how the residents described the attitudes, scale and collective memory of Nijmegen. There seems to be an active desire to participate in life in the city: who through volunteering, who through political activism and who through culture, art and music, Nijmegen seems to be knit by a strong sense of community. A local example of this openness to entrepreneurship and self-expression is the Honigcomplex, where art, entrepreneurship, sport, music, food and culture come together to provide a common ground for Nijmegen.

Our research took us to explore mainly the public, cultural and social life of the residents in the city, bringing our analysis to the streets and the threshold of public and private life. To get an insider’s view of what people get up to and what their routines are, we handed some disposable cameras to

two Nijmegeners we met and asked them to take photos of whatever they wanted during a casual day in their lives.



Disposable camera photos taken by Henry and Eric

The photos above clearly show associations with leisure time. They represent, in an imperfect and ad-hoc way, places and elements that the two young men thought was worth photographing. They talk about walks in nature, views across the landscape and the river Waal, strolling in the city centre, the activities at the market, eating some fried fish.

These photographs are a clear statement that what we do in leisure time, is in seek of pleasure, and the lifestyle, the nature, the built fabric and the culture in Nijmegen, allows its people to make pleasure and leisure part of their everyday. In my project and research, my endeavour is to explore how does this affect an architectural proposal, and how can an architectural programme and configuration allow for the fulfilment of human individual curiosity and wellbeing, connection to the natural environment and other human lives.

THEME

During the fieldwork, and as I go on observing and reasoning about the concepts for my research and design proposal, there are a number of terms that are becoming recurrent. They are presented as a list below.

Leisure: this sphere of life is identified as a major aspect of public life in the town. Being Nijmegen a town of students, and as work becomes more flexible in general, what people do in their free time becomes a key element of analysis and an opportunity to rethink what other types of leisure can a space bring to the local communities. A major part of the research that was carried out in the first quarter took place in the public domain of Nijmegen when we stopped and spoke with people who were obviously out in the city, spending their time doing things. But what exactly? Generally, leisure is associated with some type of civic or physical activity (such as going to the museum, or doing sports), but if analysed closer, what people do on the streets of the city in their leisure time show a more subtly nuanced range of acts and habits: looking at other people, seeing and being seen, playing, strolling, looking into vitrines and windows, reading at a café, cycling in nature, getting a drink, speaking with someone, window shopping, listening to music sitting in a pub, going to the market, eating out, volunteering, looking at nature, looking at the Waal, eating, making relationships, smoking. In particular, smoking, sitting, and looking at – are actions that frequently occur in public spaces. All the actions above disagree with the ordered quality of top-down architecture. They instead suggest an approach which takes into consideration the improvised, accidental serendipity. Not by accident, but central to the bricoleur's *modus operandi*.



A kid sliding down a sloped wall, Nijmegen. Photo by me

Pleasure: from the conversations with the inhabitants and the disposable camera exercise, I realised that the things people mentioned or were doing, and what they photographed during their leisure time, are all associated with the notion of pleasure. In their leisure time, people do things that they find pleasurable. This feeling can be identified as an inner feeling of satisfaction, but also a positive physical sensation (for example, the photo of the kibbling expressed the pleasure of eating, which brings a sensation to the palate). The feeling of pleasure is seen as intrinsic for happiness in human life and, indeed, a happy city. We look for it constantly. It takes place in the body, as physical sensations through our nose, skin and mouth; but also in our mind, through our eyes and ears. In the specificity of Nijmegen, the activities that happen in leisure time, and that are in search for pleasure, also seem to have a close relationship with the landscape, the sense of the past, and the urban configuration conferring a feeling of “cosiness”.

Bricolage: the idea of bricolage as a physical act, the “science of the concrete”. An act of production and reuse, of investigation of the surrounding ecology as it is found, followed by the process of selection and of borrowing from the material culture to make something that serves a purpose. Bricolage expressed a bottom-up approach to craft and the art of making. It requires a process, an inventory, the creation of a toolset from which the project stems. Bricolage also resonates with the idea of richness, the ad-hoc, the intuitive, seemingly disordered and with ingenuity, which contrasts to the clinical, polished, exact and tidy. In terms of the project, the studio theme of bricolage is taking me towards a discovery of the social complexities of Nijmegen, their effects on the built fabric, and the material culture of the site through a series of inventories. I am trying to put myself in the shoes of the architect-bricoleur by creating a tool-set for myself, which will be explained in the next chapter. The idea of bricolage also highlights the importance of resources. On the broader scheme, it is an opportunity to reflect on circularity, reuse and cycles of systems and materials, making the design proposal itself become, perhaps, a means of learning about cycles of systems and material reuse.



The tool set of a bricoleur. Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Genova

The ordinary: as previously mentioned, finding value in the every-day and the point of view of the architecturally untrained eye of the general public has become the base of the project, stemming from the fieldwork being carried out. From the film the group presented, an “extraordinary liveliness” shone through, a quality which “cannot be expected from architects” (Scalbert, 2020). This raises the fascinating question of how can architects design spaces with the grittiness and apparent “chaos” and unpredictability of everyday life in mind. This idea is the red thread that connects my methodology, and that I aim to translate in the final work, drawing scenarios of situations and including life in representation.



Drawing from the P1.5 presentation. Drawn by me

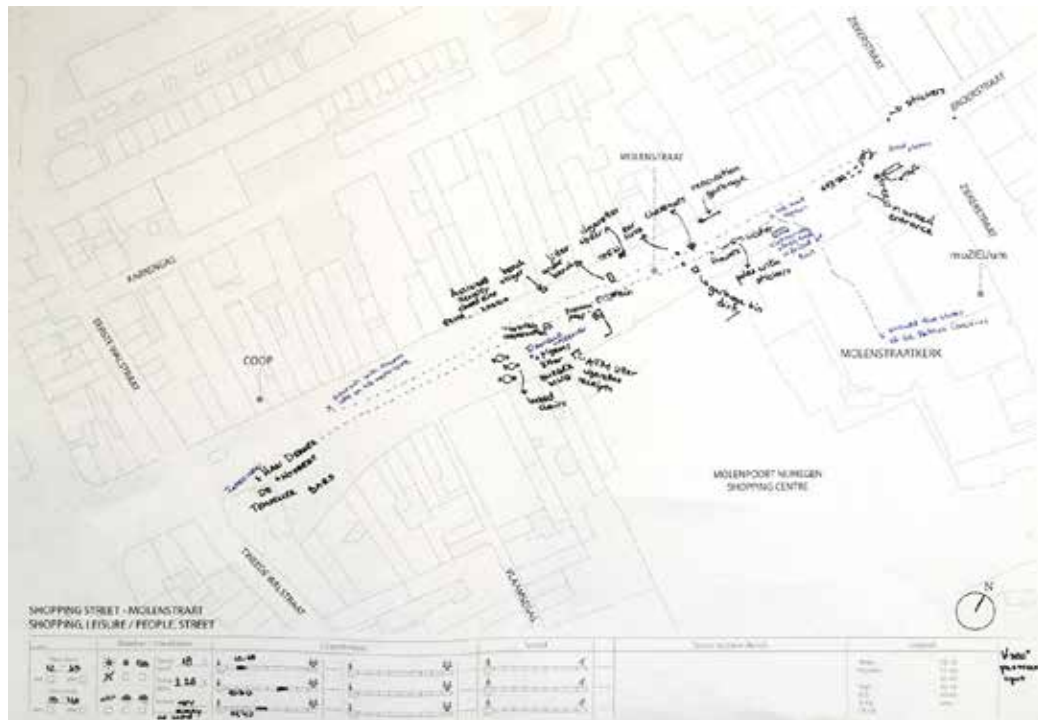
Stage: from the fieldwork, it became clear that the city and its architecture have the role of a stage set for everyday life. The stage set should frame the lives of the people that have an active role in the city. Public, everyday life should be entrenched in the urban tissue, and by providing a framework for life to unfold (which is the scope of my project), the architecture acts as a means to expose cultures, show life – and work, while allowing for a change of scenes, of actors, and accident.



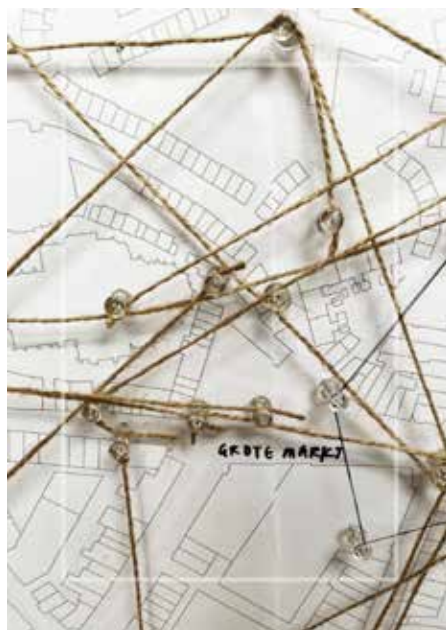
The model of the city of Nijmegen acts as a backdrop for life and its actors. Providing scenarios.
Model made for the movie presented at P1. Photo by me

METHODOLOGY

Our phenomenological methodology for the study of the socio-cultural sphere of the site started with visiting the site. After assessing the site, we created maps of the city and made assumptions of which could be the best locations within the centre of Nijmegen to begin our study on the communities. Taking inspiration from William H Whyte's "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces" and Gehl's theories on "How to Study Public Life", we dividing the group of eight people into pairs, and spread through these locations to start our qualitative research.



Carrying out qualitative research in the city. Molenstraat mapped by the group



Mapping out routes, meeting spots and locations mentioned in the interviews.

Group mapping

Although we had a carefully detailed plan in mind, we organically started conducting ipromptu interviews and engaging in casual conversations with passer-by's. Studying people requires interview and observations, site visits, photographic documentation and films. The latter in particular allowed us to get a closer insight on the use of public space, and see how people were acting in the urban stage. To understand routines, we followed people on the streets without them realising, and mapped out their routes. Staying in Nijmegen overnight gave us an impression of the night scenes in the city, and in the space of two days, we managed to interview 56 people of mixed age groups, ethnic background, gender and economic status. From those 56 people, we then selected nine to further interview and investigate, resulting in the movie presented at P1. These conversations built up an image of the city from a different perspective than the one we would have had if we were studying the built fabric, and allowed us to take a step back and appreciate the experiences of ordinary people, rather than that of architects.

If I am to act as a bricoleur, I am to investigate the surroundings and make my own set of tools to carry out my project. As a means to achieve this, I am organising my research in catalogues: the first, the Encyclopaedia of Nijmegenaars, is the result of the fieldwork for P1 and it is a collection of people of Nijmegen, their stories, personal landmarks, and collective memory. The second inventory, which will be developed in collaboration with another student that shares my same interests, is a socio-spatial catalogue of human behaviour. My aim is to make a collection of individual and collective acts performed in relation to architectural and urban elements. This collection is an ongoing work (until P4) that will be presented in a first draft state at P2, based on observation (sketching, photographing, filming, tracing photographs).

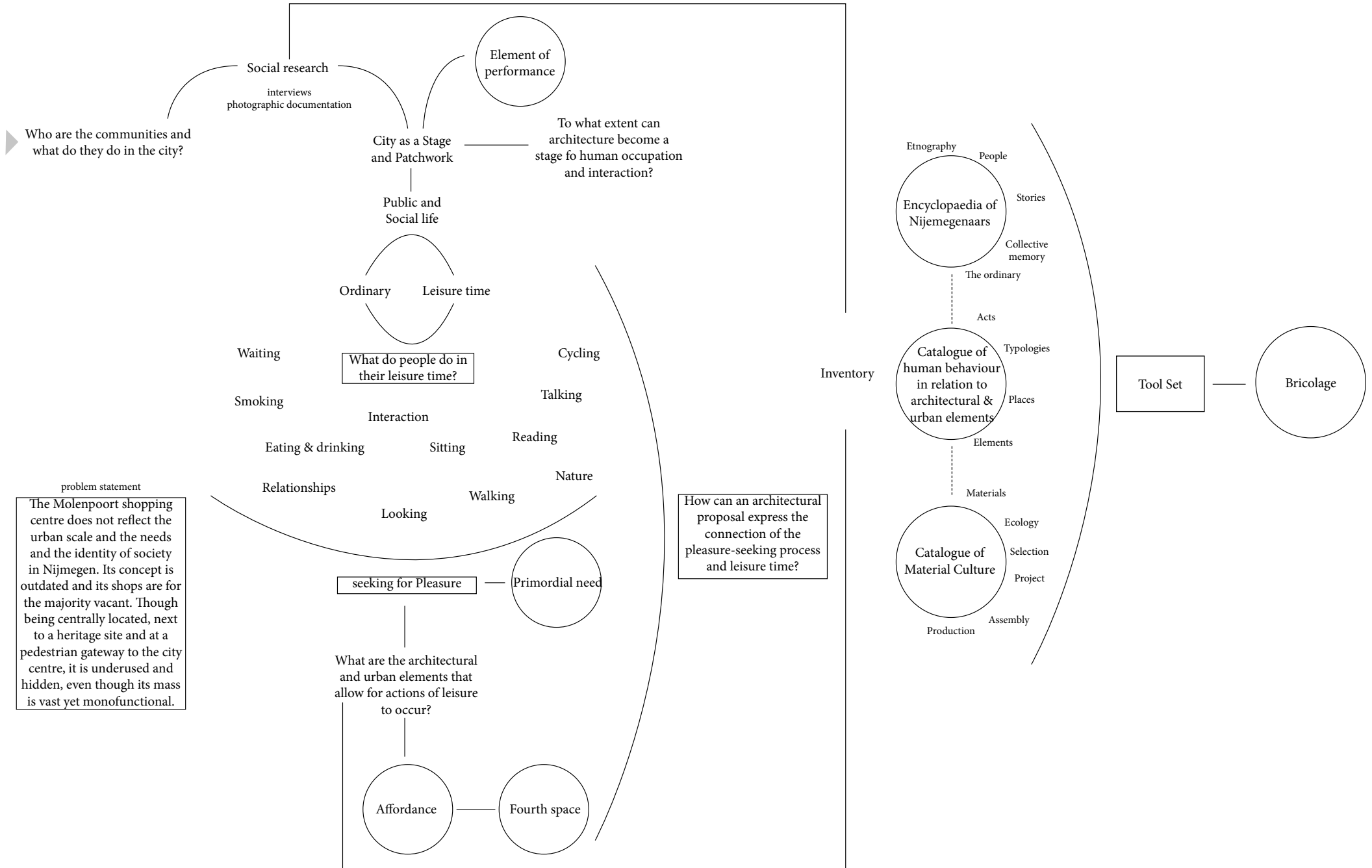


“(bricolage as ethics) of the architect attentive to the nuances of human occupation and its effects on the fabric of buildings.”

Irénée Scalbert & 6a Architects, Never Modern, 2013

The third catalogue will investigate the material culture of the site. The inventory has the aim to become a material passport, and will be a major part of the project detailing and its corporeality. It will inform what of the surrounding ecology is worth keeping, what is worth leaving (process of selection), what can be assembled into a (semi)new, public building for Nijmegen.

RESEARCH DIAGRAM



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