

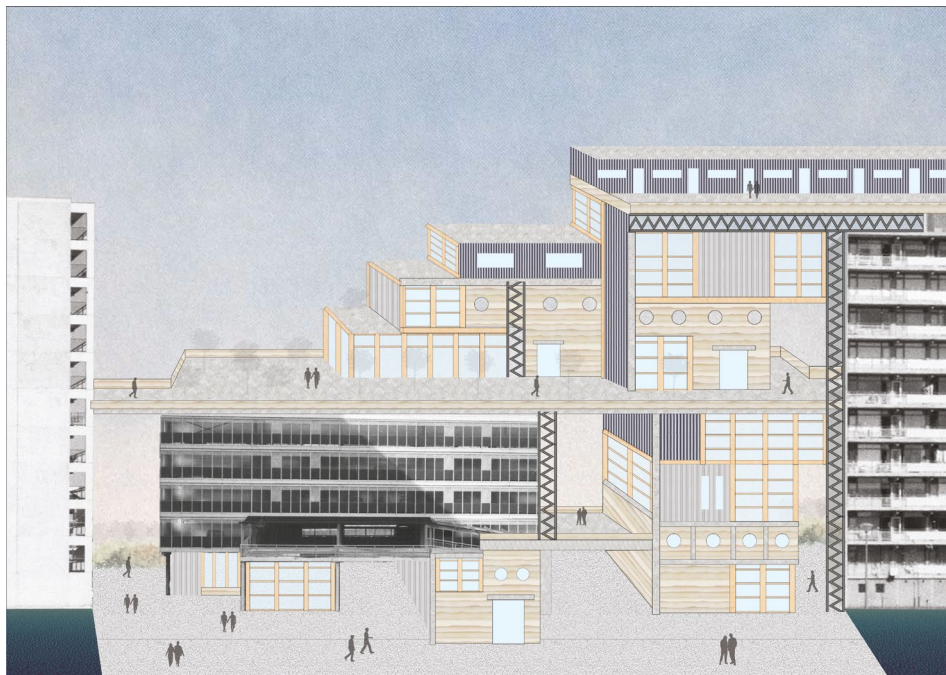
P4 REFLECTION

Tim van Iwaarden
4995554

Heritage & Architecture - Graduation Studio | Transitional Identities

Tutors:

SMarchS Christopher de Vries
Ir. Lidwine Spoormans
Dr. Anet Meijer



1. Relation to Track and Programme

For my graduation project, I took on the challenge of improving the public realm of Molenwijk, a classic modernist neighbourhood in Amsterdam North. The topic provided by the studio Architectural Heritage: Transitional Identities—civic centres in Amsterdam North—immediately resonated with me. I was drawn to the question: how do people gather, and what spatial and social infrastructure supports this gathering?

During my first site visit, I was struck by the deteriorated state of Molenwijk's civic architecture and the lack of coherent public space. I chose to intervene at both the urban and architectural scales: redesigning aspects of the neighbourhood's functional layout while transforming an underused parking garage into a new civic centre.

Central to my approach was a critical engagement with the existing urban fabric. Rather than pursuing demolition, I aimed to build upon what was already there—spatially, historically, and socially. A phrase I encountered in a tutor's notebook—"slopen is bezopen" (demolishing is drunkenness)—captured this attitude well. Demolition not only wastes material but risks erasing collective memories embedded in space. That said, transformation demands judgement: which elements are worth preserving, and which must be adapted, and above all, who chooses?

These questions were particularly pressing in Molenwijk, a neighbourhood that isn't formally protected, leaving such decisions largely in my hands. The challenges facing Amsterdam North—especially in terms of urban transformation, densification, and shifting mobility patterns—are real. My project addresses these directly. Repurposing a parking garage as a civic centre reflects a broader shift away from car-centric suburbia and toward more integrated, sustainable urban life. As the city plans to add 150 new dwellings next to my site, the urgency of reinforcing civic infrastructure in Molenwijk becomes all the more clear.

2. Interaction Between Research and Design

My research began with historical and archival investigations into Molenwijk, aiming to assess the value of the existing design and situate it within a broader architectural and urban context. As the predecessor of the Bijlmermeer, Molenwijk embodies a critical moment in Dutch urbanism—experimenting with industrialised building techniques and car-oriented planning. This understanding formed the groundwork for how I began to approach the neighbourhood. Initially, I was eager to dive into architectural design—an anxiety-driven attempt to gain early control over the project. But I gradually realised that mobility had to be addressed first. Without rethinking how the car functions within the neighbourhood, no architectural intervention would be meaningful. This realisation redirected my focus: I began 'hacking' the parking garage to make space for a civic centre while retaining part of its original function. However, I had not yet fully understood that I should be reading the entire neighbourhood through a mobility lens.

Parallel to this, another part of my research emerged from architectural curiosity. I started drawing the parking garage in detail, which led to a near-obsessive effort to map every building element in Molenwijk. Because of its standardised components this exercise felt not only feasible but revealing. I hoped that understanding the tectonic language of the existing fabric might uncover latent architectural qualities that went beyond functionalist logic.

This interest in tectonics deepened when I read Kenneth Frampton's *Studies in Tectonic Culture*, which prompted my main research question: How can the tectonic culture of Molenwijk be appropriated in civic centre design to create a space of appearance that reflects its urban identity? Inspired by Frampton, I built a theoretical framework linking his categories—stereotomic, tectonic, atectonic—with Hannah Arendt's labour, work, and action. Her idea of the "space of appearance" added depth to my thinking about civic architecture as a space where identity becomes public through action and speech (Diagram 2).

At this point, I tried to narrate my design through these tectonic categories (tectonic, stereotomic and atectonic). Yet as my tutor pointed out after P2, a narrative intelligible only to me cannot serve a truly public architecture. This critique forced a shift. At P3 I still tried to keep these terms in the presentation, but it just conflicted with the narrative. I retained the conceptual underpinnings but translated them into more accessible terms: a "heavy" character (linked to the cave) and a "light" character (linked to the nest). I let go of the atectonic altogether, as it conflicted with the legibility of the story I wanted to tell. I also engaged with George Baird's *The Space of Appearance*, which provided a more communicable set of values—recognisability, transparency, accessibility, durability, and flexibility. In hindsight, these principles might have offered a more grounded starting point than Frampton's tectonic distinctions. They are easier to share and communicate. For example: I want the building to be recognisable as an important structure, so I could design a heavy characterised plinth (stereotomic), which is in a sense a way to create a building that has a base or mound (Frampton, 1995). These ideas were eventually incorporated into a simplified conceptual diagram that illustrates the transition from theoretical abstraction to accessible design goals (Diagram 3).

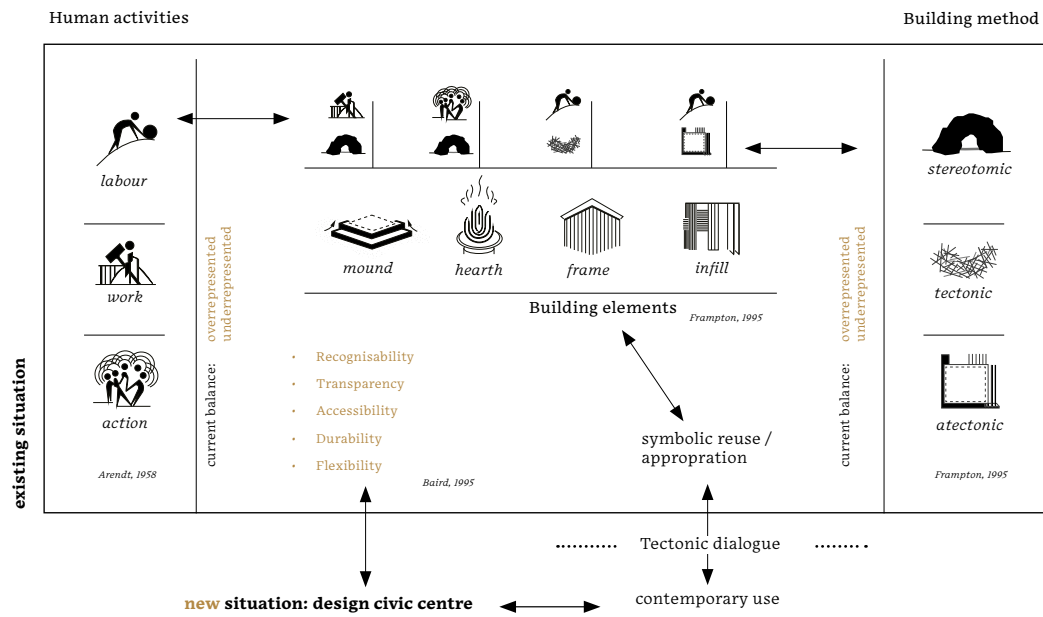


Diagram 2

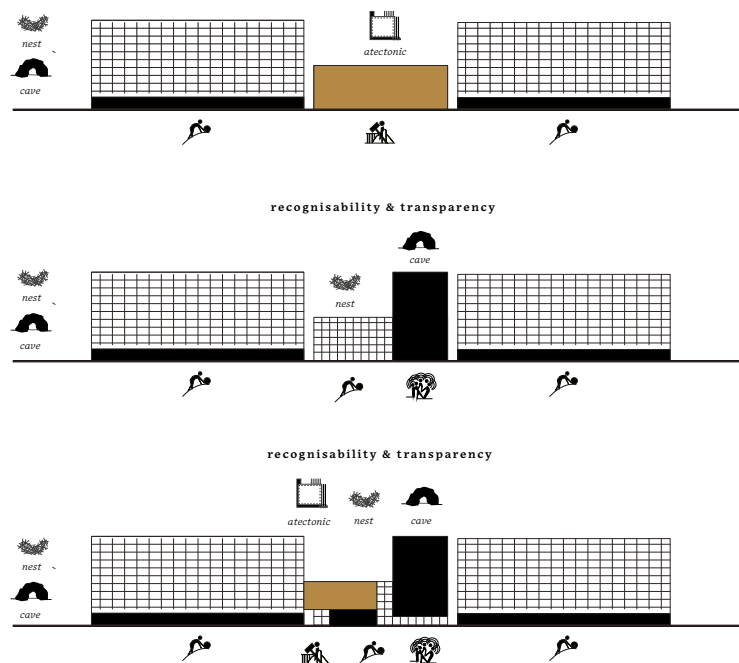


Diagram 3

3. Reflection on Your Way of Working

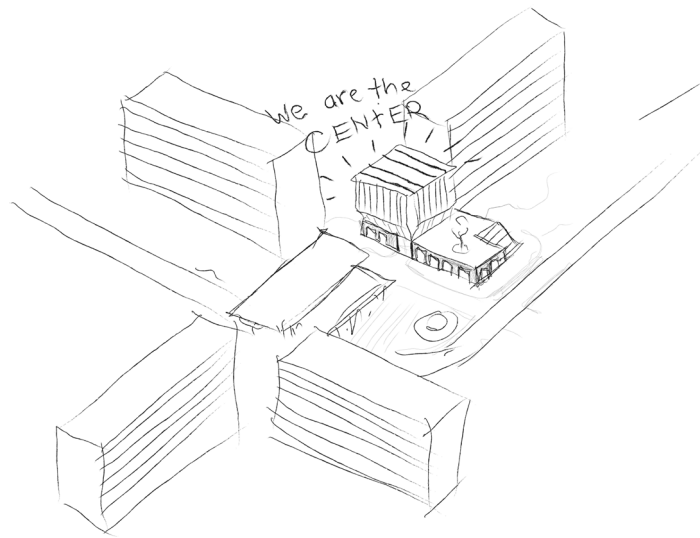
My approach combined a mixed methodology of urban mapping, literature review, site analysis through photography, and iterative design. This combination helped me engage with both the physical and conceptual layers of Molenwijk. However, the balance between technical rigour and social understanding proved difficult to maintain.

Early on, the theoretical research I undertook—particularly the work of Frampton, Arendt, and Baird—sometimes narrowed my view of what design could achieve. I focused heavily on understanding the existing context in great detail, hoping to find a single, correct response to the spatial, social, and ethical complexities of the site. At times, this created inertia: I was so deep in analysis that I found it difficult to move into action.

Site visits and photography were crucial in developing a feel for the neighbourhood and helped me formulate a programme. However, my method of drawing all the tectonic elements—while technically insightful—failed to capture the lived experiences of residents. A telling moment was when I visited Molenwijk with a clipboard of building details, asking passersby if these elements were “typical” of the neighbourhood. Although this exercise didn’t make it into the report, it revealed the limits of my early methodology: I was committed to the approach, but it was more effective for understanding the built environment than the social one.

Fortunately, I also visited the Molenwijkmarkt and the two civic centres of Molenwijk several times to speak with residents and municipal staff. These encounters grounded my design, but I did not translate them into academically structured data—something I would handle differently in hindsight. From the beginning, my ambition was to design architecture that reflects civic pride. The run-down civic buildings I encountered on my first site visit were technically functional. One of them, in fact, is simply a reused construction shed slated for demolition by the end of 2025. These observations highlighted a deeper issue in Molenwijk’s modernist plan: the absence of hierarchy—urban, programmatic, and architectural.

At the urban level, the hierarchy of movement is skewed by mono-modal planning. Programmatically, a lack of mixed use has led to an inactive ground plane. And architecturally, the uniformity of industrialised building methods has flattened expression. These challenges became the basis of my design ambition: to reintroduce hierarchy and orientation at multiple scales. I envisioned an architecture that is accessible, recognisable, flexible, durable, and transparent—qualities inspired by our studio’s recurring theme of appropriability. The difficulty here, however, is that civic pride often requires a sense of monumentality, which can be at odds with human-scale participation. For me, the key was to design a civic centre that is both appropriable and hierarchical—what I now come to call an “appropriable temple” (Sketch 1). This aligning my experiences with direct design goals and aims was the whole design process a difficulty for me. I kept on searching for answers in the existing buildings around Molenwijk to come up with the perfect “solution”, but there is no perfect solution, just more iterations. And that is how I want to view my project, the next iteration of Molenwijk.



4. Academic and Societal Value, Scope and Implication

This project contributes academically by revisiting and reframing the legacy of modernist neighbourhoods like Molenwijk through a critical design lens. Rather than approaching modernist planning as a failure to be corrected through demolition or densification alone, the project takes a position of transformative engagement—working with the existing conditions while exposing their structural limits. It brings together theory, mapping, archival analysis, and tectonic investigation to develop an architectural language rooted in the neighbourhood's material and spatial reality. The use of thinkers like Kenneth Frampton, Hannah Arendt and George Baird situates the work within ongoing academic conversations about tectonics, publicness, and the political role of architecture.

Societally, the project speaks to the urgent question of how to deal with large-scale post-war housing areas, many of which are entering a second phase of renewal. In the case of Molenwijk, the project avoids the common narrative of “starting over” and instead proposes strategic adaptation—preserving memory, material, and place identity while introducing new civic structure and meaning. The conversion of a parking garage into a civic centre also signals a symbolic shift in mobility culture, confronting the suburban car-dependence embedded in the original plan. It reflects broader societal changes in how cities are moving away from car dependency, and how urban infrastructure can be repurposed to serve public life.

Ethically, the project resists the tabula rasa approach that often accompanies urban renewal. Demolition is not neutral—it erases memory, wastes material, and often displaces communities. By contrast, this project asks what value can be found in the existing—materially, culturally, and spatially—and how design can make that value visible again. The approach affirms the idea that dignity in architecture comes not only from newness or scale, but from the care with which something is reinterpreted and reintroduced into public life.

However, the project also recognises its own limitations. While it makes space for resident voices through informal conversations and observations, these were not formally embedded into the research methodology. This limits the depth of its societal claim. Still, the ambition to design for civic pride—an architecture that is both recognisable and appropriable—rests upon the idea that public buildings should not dominate, but invite; not dictate, but support the life that surrounds them.

In scope, the project deals with one site, but its implications extend to similar contexts across the Netherlands and beyond. The balance it tries to strike between monumentality and participation, transformation and recognition, is a question shared by many post-war urban landscapes. The academic and societal relevance of this work lies in that balancing act.

5. Transferability of Project Results

Even though this project is specific to Molenwijk, I think many of the issues it deals with—like outdated mobility structures, inactive ground levels, and the lack of civic identity—are common in other post-war neighbourhoods in the Netherlands and beyond. The solutions I propose aren't meant to be copied directly elsewhere, but the general approach could be useful in similar contexts.

What could be transferred is the way of thinking: working with what's already there instead of demolishing it, reading the neighbourhood through different lenses (like mobility, programme, and material), and then using those insights to guide the design. Especially the idea of adding hierarchy—both in movement and in architecture—feels relevant in many places that were planned in a similar modernist way.

Also, the idea of combining civic pride with appropriability—what I started calling an “appropriable temple”—could be an interesting concept in other neighbourhoods. It’s about designing a building that feels important, but still invites people to take ownership. That tension between monumentality and human scale is not just a Molenwijk issue.

Some technical strategies, like reusing parts of a parking garage, or cutting away existing elements to create space and reuse material, are also scalable ideas. They might not be one-size-fits-all, but they show how existing structures can be adapted rather than discarded.

At the same time, I know that some parts of my research—like the tectonic analysis—are quite specific to Molenwijk and might not work the same way elsewhere. Transferability, then, lies in the mindset rather than the model: a way of designing that sees complexity not as a reason to clear the slate, but as a reason to read more carefully, build more precisely, and intervene more meaningfully.

Personal Reflection Question 1:

How can a building be both monumental and appropriable—and where do those values start to conflict in design?

This question became central as I tried to design a civic centre that would stand out between the four housing slabs of Molenwijk without dominating them. I wanted to create a strong architectural presence—something that would announce itself as a centre—but still respect the open and collective character of the neighbourhood. The typology of the temple inspired me, especially its ability to symbolically mark a civic space. But I was aware of the risk that it could feel like a top-down imposition—something foreign to the daily life of residents.

To deal with this, I worked with contrast: a heavy, grounded base and a light, open steel structure above. I wanted the building to feel important without becoming intimidating. The challenge was always in how far I could go with expressing hierarchy without losing the sense of human scale. You never fully know how this lands in reality, but I tried to test it through drawings—placing people in the space to explore proportion and atmosphere. In the end, I think the balance is there, but it remains a tension that I’d be interested to explore further and really dive into drawings techniques for P5 to express this tension.

Personal Reflection Question 2

To what extent can architectural tectonics carry meaning for the general public—and when does it become too abstract?

I started this project with a strong belief in tectonics as a way to express meaning in architecture. I used Frampton’s ideas and tried to apply them to my design to make the civic centre feel rooted in its context. But during the process, I realised that much of this meaning was only visible to people with a background in architecture. This made me rethink how I communicate ideas through materials and construction. In the end, I simplified the tectonic narrative, focusing more on atmosphere, contrast, and clarity. I still believe tectonics matter, but I’ve learned they need to be paired with accessible design choices to really connect with people.