

Space for sexwork

Exploring Architectural and Urban Aspects to
Support Sex Workers and Promote Their Social
Visibility in Rotterdam

Research report
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Abstract

This research explores the landscape of sex work in Rotterdam, a city marked by historical interesting sex workspaces, which are pushed out of the eye of the main public. The research addresses the question of a potential next step by examining the current state of sex work in Rotterdam and the challenges faced by sex workers, including issues of safety, visibility, and inclusivity. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study includes a contextual analysis of Rotterdam's historical sex work locations, literature research, and photo elicitation interviews with sex workers to understand their needs and perspectives. The findings highlight the crucial importance of accessibility, privacy, and a sense of belonging in the urban context, as well as the necessity for integrated and flexible spatial typologies that promote inclusivity, community, and independence. The research also reveals that safety is a primary concern in interactions, with the window, both offline and online, playing a significant role. This paper aims to inform the development of design principles for creating a safer and more inclusive environment for sex work in Rotterdam.

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Introduction

In Rotterdam there is a noticeable absence of visible and safe spaces for sex workers. This paper aims to outline the evolving landscape of sex work in Rotterdam and explore the question of what the next steps might be.

For this research we look at Rotterdam, a city where sex work has always been present but has largely been pushed out of the public eye and criminalized by both society and municipal policies for the past 20 years. In Rotterdam, there is an absence of visible and safe spaces for sex workers ¹, a situation deeply rooted in longstanding municipal policies that have marginalized this community. ² While luxury forms of prostitution, such as brothels and private residences, are legally recognized, other forms, including street work and window prostitution, remain prohibited after the closing of the Keileweg in 2005. ³ This restriction severely limits the autonomy of sex workers, forcing many into unsafe, unregulated environments where they are vulnerable to exploitation, harassment, and violence. ⁴

The municipality's approach to sex work has traditionally been marked by policies of dispersal and criminalization, aimed at pushing sex work out of visible spaces and into more controlled, hidden settings. This lack of visibility and

¹ Prostitutie in Rotterdam: sekswerkers voelen zich niet veilig. (2020, May). *OPEN Rotterdam*.

² Hazewinkel, F., & Archiefdienst, G. (1982). *Prostitutiebeleid in Rotterdam (1828-1982)*

³ Rijnmond. (2021, December 20). Toppelzone Keileweg gesloten. *Rijnmond*. <https://www.rijnmond.nl/nieuws/51225/toppelzone-keileweg-gesloten>

⁴ Van Den Braak Daphné Dupont-Nivet, S. (2023, February 13). *Focus op controle en veiligheid drukt sekswerkers alleen maar verder de illegaliteit in.* Vers Beton. <https://www.versbeton.nl/2020/05/focus-op-controle-en-veiligheid-drukt-sekswerkers-alleen-maar-verder-de-illegaliteit-in/>

safety poses significant challenges for sex workers, who are deprived of the opportunities for community building, support, and self-determination. At the same time, the growth of digital platforms has shifted the landscape of sex work, with many sex workers turning to online platforms or operating from private homes and hotel rooms.⁵ While this shift offers more flexibility, it does not reduce the fundamental issues related to visibility and the lack of official recognition.

In response to these conditions, sex workers have increasingly called for change. Initiatives such as the Sex Worker Pride have emerged, advocating for safer, legal spaces where sex work can be recognized and respected.⁶ However, the municipality of Rotterdam has historically responded with demotivating policies, often dismissing the needs and rights of sex workers. This paper examines the current state of sex work in Rotterdam, the challenges faced by sex workers in the city, and the growing demand for safe, visible, and legally recognized spaces. Through this exploration, I aim to find a solution in design principles that can give new perspective on the topic while serving the needs of the sex workers.

The discussion of the closure of several sex work establishments⁷ across the Netherlands and the ongoing

⁵ PowNed (Director). (2021, December). *Seksengelen*. Goya Productions.

⁶ Madnoersen, N. (2024, September). DPG Media Privacy Gate. https://www.ad.nl/rotterdam/rotterdamse-sekswerkers-op-de-bres-stad-duwt-ons-de-illegaliteit-in~abel7d94/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F%3Bcb=2400f62a-13c1-4180-9955-62574665bed3&%3Bauth_rd=1&cb=387e577a-60c0-4d76-bdf9-4eecd6c4bae&auth_rd=1

⁷ DPG Media Privacy Gate. (n.d.). <https://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/nijmegen-komt-niet-zomaar-vanzijn-tippelzone-af-in-het-bordeel-moest-ik-voor-23-euro-alle-standjes-doen~b228fa7d/>

debate about a new erotic centre in Amsterdam ⁸ reflect changing policies and attitudes toward sex work. This debate reflects broader societal issues surrounding the visibility and rights of sex workers. As Hubbard and Sanders ⁹ argue, the geography of sex work is shaped by the dynamic interaction between different types of spaces: the ordered spaces of the capitalist state, on one hand, and the 'lived' spaces of sex work, on the other. In their analysis of the changing geographies of prostitution in Birmingham, UK, they emphasized how the representation of space versus the spaces of representation interacts with various social and political forces. These competing interests influence where sex work is tolerated and where it is marginalized or expelled.

This dynamic can be better understood through Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space. ¹⁰ Lefebvre posits that space is not merely a neutral backdrop for social activities but is actively produced through social, political, and economic processes. In the context of sex work, the spaces in which it is conducted are shaped by legal, cultural, and moral discourses that reflect the power relations between the state, society, and sex workers themselves. The state's regulation of sex work often results in the exclusion of sex workers from certain public spaces, pushing them into hidden, marginalized locations. Meanwhile, sex workers lived experiences, their struggles for visibility and recognition,

⁸ NOS. (2023b, December 18). *Halsema wil erotisch centrum Amsterdam bij Europaboulevard*. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2502052-halsema-wil-erotisch-centrum-amsterdam-bij-europaboulevard>

⁹ Hubbard, P., & Sanders, T. (2003). Making space for sex work: female street prostitution and the production of urban space. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(1), 75–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00432>

¹⁰ Lefebvre, H. (1992). *The production of space*. Wiley-Blackwell.

create alternative spatial practices that challenge the state's control over where and how they can operate.

Therefore, the geography of sex work in Rotterdam and other cities is not merely a product of urban planning but is linked to broader societal power structures. The "production" of space extends beyond physical locations to include the social and political ideologies that shape the visibility and acceptance of sex work. This interaction between spatial concepts and the lived experiences of sex workers highlights the need for spaces that are not only safe and accessible but also assert a presence within the urban landscape, actively challenging societal power dynamics and affirming the role of sex work in the city.

This leads to the central research question:

Which spatial aspects, architectural and urban, can create an environment in Rotterdam that addresses the needs and challenges of sexworkers while enhancing the visibility of their social role?

Following this introduction, this paper will outline the current needs and challenges faced by sex workers, drawing upon existing research and reporting on sex work. Subsequently, it will delve into the historical context of sex work in Rotterdam, tracing its process through the years and locations such as the Zandstraatbuurt, Katendrecht, and the Keileweg. The paper will then go into the methodology used; the photo elicitation interviews conducted with sex workers to understand their insights on how spatial aspects can meet their needs. The results of these interviews will be presented, categorized by key values such as safety, community, independence, belonging, privacy, accessibility, and inclusivity. Finally, the paper will offer conclusions based on the research findings, focusing on urban context, typology, and interaction, ultimately aiming to inform the

development of design principles for a safer and more inclusive environment for sex work in Rotterdam.

Context and background

Needs and challenges



Sex work can take various forms, for example employment through agencies, clubs, or brothels, as well as working independently. In most cities in the Netherlands, Rotterdam included places where independent sex work can take place, like street or window sex work, are forbidden.¹¹ Sexworkers that want to work from home have to deal with regulations imposed by the municipality makes it exceedingly difficult to operate legally in these settings. For example, home-based sex work is only permitted under very limited conditions: it must not be operated as a commercial or licensed sex business, the sex worker must be registered at the address in the Municipal Personal Records Database (BRP), working with others is prohibited, and advertising is not allowed. According to research about sex work in Rotterdam¹² these

¹¹ Sekswerk Goed Geregeld. (2023, April 18). *Rotterdam – Sekswerk goed geregeld*.
<https://prostitutiegoedgeregeld.nl/beleid/rotterdam/>

¹² Investico, Vers Beton, & OPEN Rotterdam. (2020, May). *Prostitutie in Rotterdam: sekswerkers voelen zich niet veilig*. OPEN Rotterdam.

restrictions contribute to significant *safety and privacy* risks, such as exposure to violence and stalking.

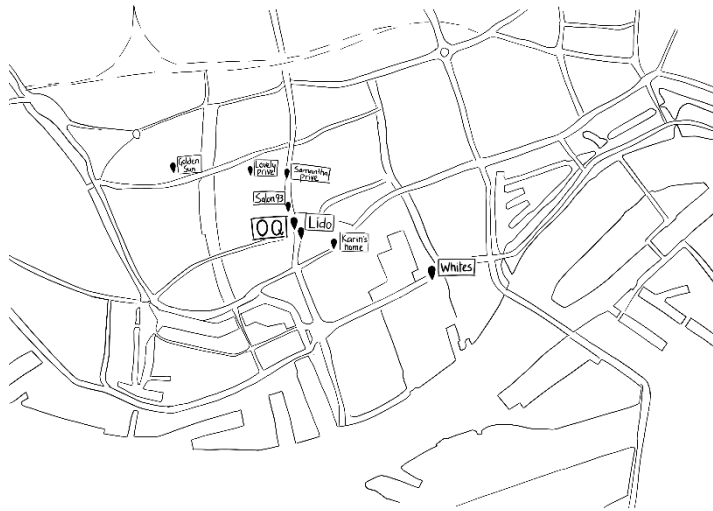


Figure 1: Some well-known existing sex work-establishments (March 2025)

For those working through an agency, club, or brothel, there are still some establishments available, as seen in figure 1. However, these locations are gradually disappearing due to restrictive policies and no new permits are given.¹³ Additionally, many sex workers are not welcomed in these establishments because they do not fit the standard profile of workers that these places prefer to hire.¹⁴ Those who do gain access must work under a manager, often surrendering up to half of their income while having little control over their schedule and working conditions. As a result, *inclusivity and independence* remain significant challenges within this sector.

¹³ Sekswerk Goed Geregeld. (2023, April 18).

¹⁴ Investico, Vers Beton, & OPEN Rotterdam. (2020, May). Prostitutie in Rotterdam: sekswerkers voelen zich niet veilig. *OPEN Rotterdam*.

Sex work is still not treated like any other legal profession in the Netherlands.

– Sinsia van Kalker, Soa Aids Nederland

Several organizations have pointed out that the stigma surrounding sex work leads to significant challenges. For instance, SOA Aids Nederland states that "sex work is still not treated like any other legal profession in the Netherlands."¹⁵ While strict regulations are intended to prevent violence and human trafficking, research indicates that they often have the opposite effect. Recognizing sex work as legitimate employment and fostering a sense of *belonging* are crucial steps toward improving safety in the industry.



Creating an inclusive environment is essential for everyone, especially within the erotic service industry. Recently, there has been growing recognition of this form of sex work. The book *A Piece of Love* highlights¹⁶ the significance and beauty of such intimate connections. Accessibility plays a crucial role in the design of such spaces, ensuring that all

¹⁵ Soa Aids Nederland. 2023. "Nieuwe Database Voor Sekswerkers Geeft Inzicht in Gemeentelijke Regels". 17 april 2023. <https://www.soaids.nl/nl/professionals/actueel/nieuwsbericht/nieuwe-database-voor-sekswerkers-geeft-inzicht-in-gemeentelijke-regels>.

¹⁶ Een stukje liefde, Sofie van Calseijde Tika Stardust

individuals feel welcome and safe. Additionally, access to emergency services, such as the police and hospitals, is vital. In this sector, where safety concerns are prevalent, it is especially important to design spaces that are both inclusive and *accessible* for everyone and have access to essential support services.



▲ De Sexworker Pride in Rotterdam © Killian Lindenburg

Rotterdamse sekswerkers op de bres: 'Stad duwt ons de illegaliteit in'

During my visit to the Sex Workers' Pride in September last year (Rotterdam, 2024), I observed how essential the sense of *community* is within this industry. A supportive space is essential not only for addressing issues that are still existing in the business such as human trafficking, abuse, and health concerns but also to celebrate, embrace and support each other in the profession.¹⁷

These insights provide a clear picture of the needs and challenges surrounding the current state of sex work in Rotterdam. In summary, the key values can be outlined as follows:

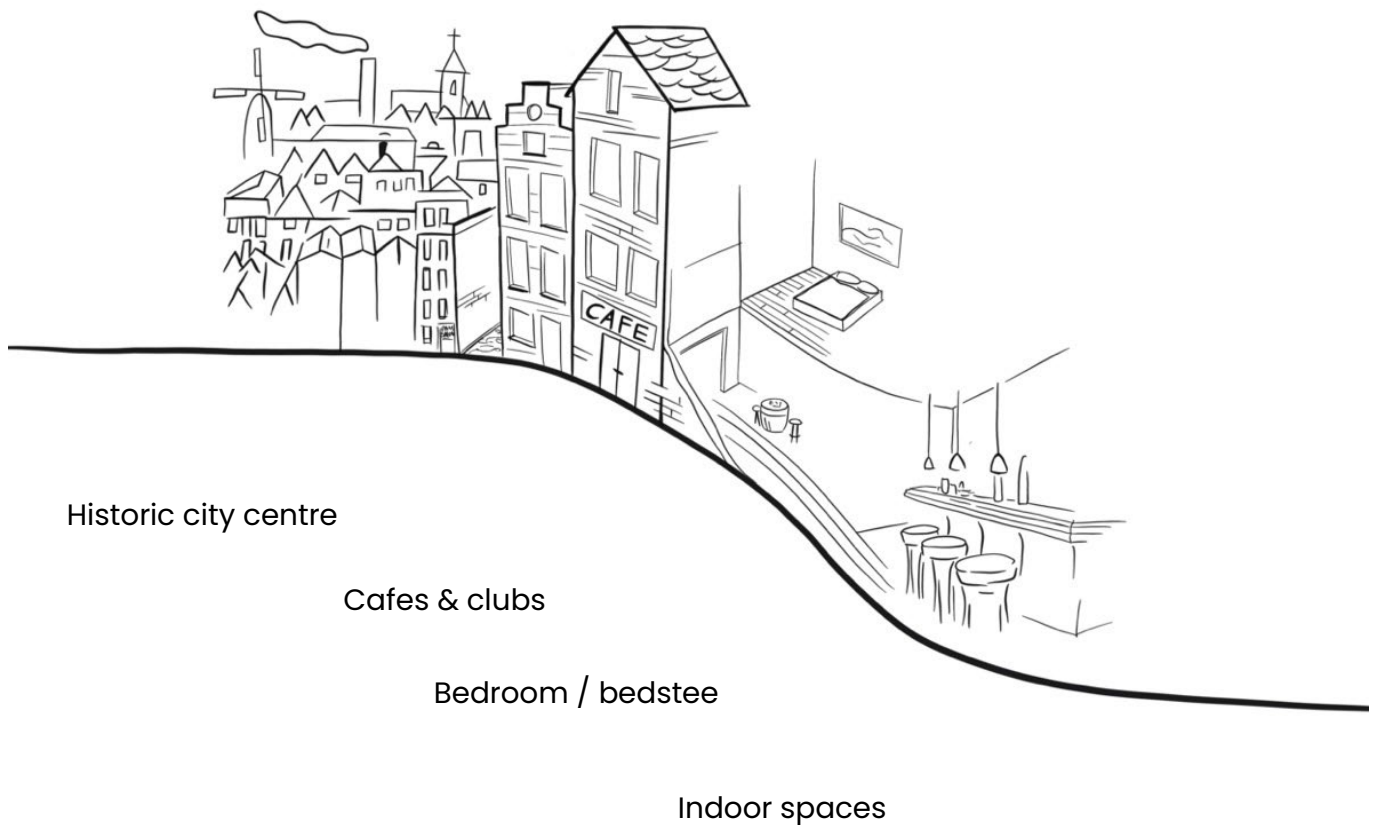
- **Community:** Building a supportive network among sex workers, allies, and local residents to combat isolation and promote collective well-being.

¹⁷ N Madnoersen, N. (2024, September). *DPG Media Privacy Gate*. https://www.ad.nl/rotterdam/rotterdamse-sekswerkers-op-de-bres-stad-duwt-ons-de-illegaliteit-in~abe17d94/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F%3Bcb=2400f62a-13c1-4180-9955-62574665bed3&%3Bauth_rd=1&cb=387e577a-60c0-4d76-bdf9-4eecfd6c4bae&auth_rd=1

- **Safety:** Creating environments that minimize risks of violence, exploitation, and harassment, ensuring both physical and emotional security.
- **Independence:** Empowering sex workers with autonomy over their work conditions, choices, and financial stability without excessive restrictions.
- **Belonging:** Integrating sex workers into society, reducing stigma, and fostering a sense of value and acceptance.
- **Privacy:** Protecting confidentiality and maintaining control over personal and professional boundaries to safeguard identities and well-being.
- **Accessibility:** Designing spaces and services that are inclusive and easy to navigate, ensuring equal access for all, including those with disabilities or other challenges.
- **Inclusivity:** Emphasizes the need for spaces and policies that respect and accommodate diverse identities, experiences, and needs within the sex work community, including gender, cultural, and socioeconomic differences.

History and context of sex work in Rotterdam

To determine what is needed to address these needs and challenges, it is essential to first examine the current context and historical background. Understanding the steps taken in the past and how they have shaped the present situation provides insight into possible next steps.



We start in the Zandstraatbuurt, where sexworkers operated from 1850 till 1920. This neighbourhood, often referred to as "Het Roode Zand" (The Red Sand), was located **in the city centre** and was known for its overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions, as well as its association with poverty and vice.¹⁸

The urban density and lack of proper sanitation led to it being widely regarded as "the centre of poverty, pollution,

¹⁸ L. Schotting en H. Spiekman, *Arm Rotterdam: Hoe het woont! Hoe het leeft!* (Rotterdam: W. L. Brusse, 1903)

and adultery" (Stadsarchief Rotterdam). Despite its poor reputation, the Zandstraatbuurt attracted an ever-growing number of people, including sailors who visited the area in the early 20th century.¹⁹ This immigration led to an expansion of bars, dance halls, and other indoor social spaces where people gathered, further cementing the area's reputation as a place of indulgence and vice.²⁰

Inside the bars and clubs, sex workers met their clients, and these establishments became crucial spaces for the exchange of services. In these indoor spaces, the workers and their clients would engage in transactions before retreating to private rooms or the "bedstee" (small private spaces or beds) in nearby homes.

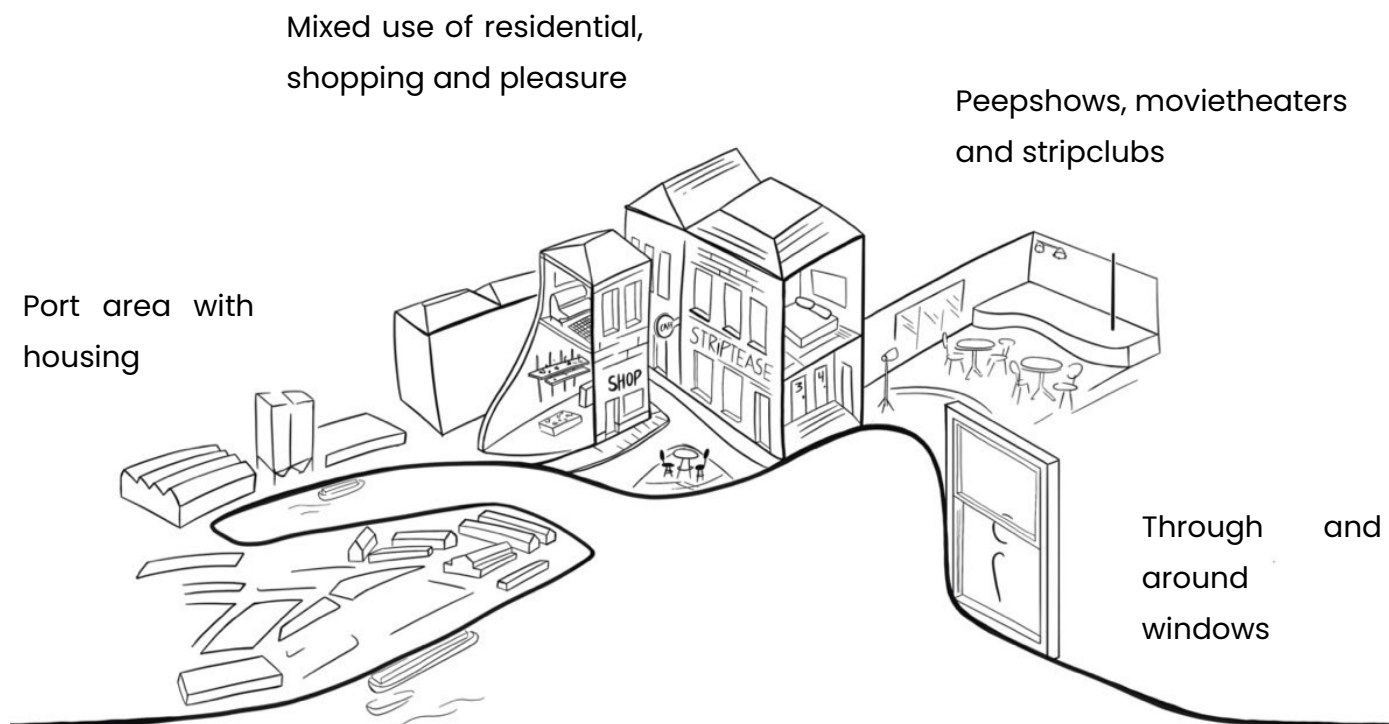
By 1909, the city decided to demolish the Zandstraatbuurt to make way for the construction of the new City Hall.²¹ This marked the end of the Zandstraatbuurt as a centre of sex work and led to the relocation of many of the sex workers to other parts of Rotterdam. A street prostitution zone was established along the Schiedamse Dijk, while indoor sex work activities began to shift to Katendrecht.²²

¹⁹ Baptist, V. (2023). *Pleasure Near the Port: Spaces and legacies of notorious entertainment culture in 20th-Century Rotterdam*. [Doctoral Thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam] p. 54–55

²⁰ Brusse, M. J. (1912). *Het rosse leven en sterven van de Zandstraat*.

²¹ Stadsarchief Rotterdam. *De Zandstraatbuurt* | Stadsarchief Rotterdam. Retrieved March 18, 2025, from <https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/zoek-en-ontdek/themas/een-nieuw-stadhuis/de-zandstraatbuurt/>.

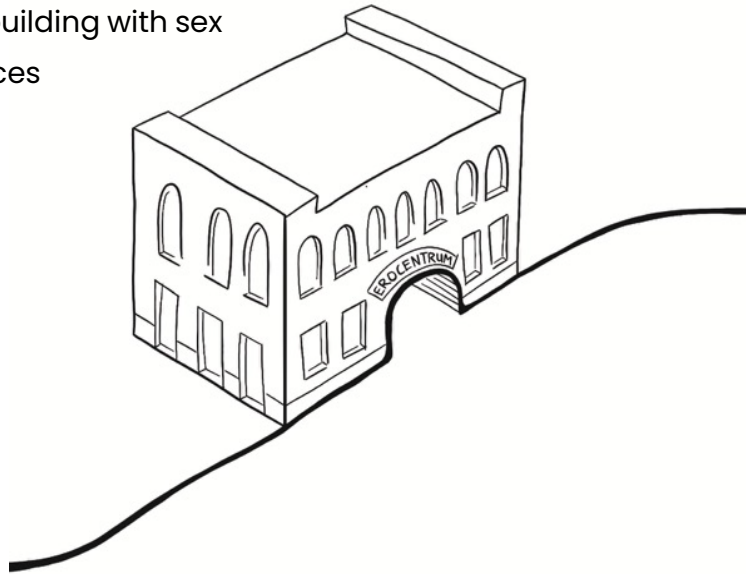
²² Baptist, *Pleasure Near the Port* 84–110



Katendrecht, an area previously associated with port functions and residential housing, became a new hub for sex work between 1910 and 1980. The area, located on the south side of the Maas, was an early form of a China town, where the new sexworkers took place in gambling houses and prostitution places in and around the Deliplein and Atjehstreet.²³ The introduction of brothels, peep shows, theatres, and strip clubs created a mixed use of residential, shopping and pleasure. The window was an important element where sexworkers and client met each other through and around the window.

²³ Davids, K. (1987). De "rosse" Kaap. Over het stigma van een Rotterdamse buurt 1900-1985. In H. Diederiks, & C. Quispel (Eds.), *Onderscheid en minderheid. Sociaal-historische opstellen over discriminatie en vooroordeel* (pp.150-173). Uitgeverij Verloren

Central building with sex
workspaces

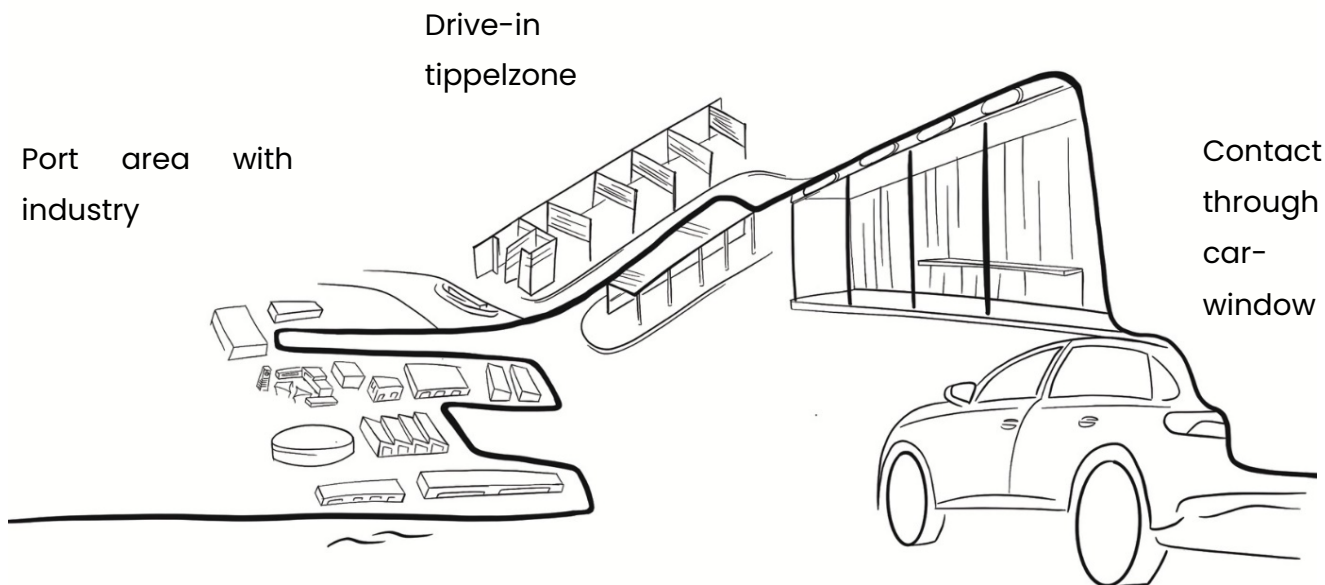


The move of the sex industry to Katendrecht was not without conflict. Over the years, local residents and sex workers clashed over the presence of the sex trade in the neighbourhood.²⁴

In the 1970s, the municipality began exploring the idea of creating an "erotic centre" to centralize sex work, with potential locations including the area around the Central Station, boats in front of the Euromast, or even an erotic centre in the Poortgebouw.²⁵ However, widespread demonstrations against these proposals and insufficiently progressive policies made it never happen.

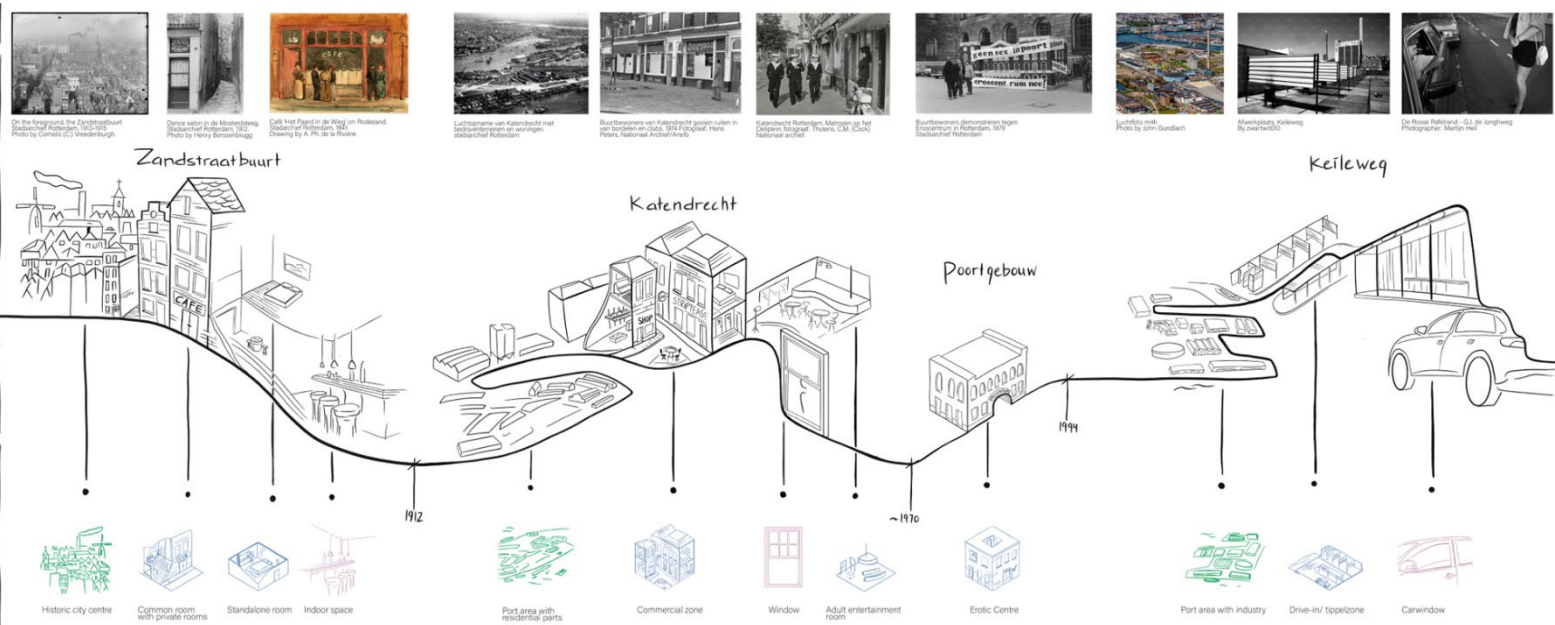
²⁴ Hazewinkel, F., & Archiefdienst, G. (1982). Prostitutiebeleid in Rotterdam (1828-1982): de naakte feiten over mislukte pogingen de prostitutie te concentreren en te kanaliseren.

²⁵ Hazewinkel and Archiefdienst (1982)



By 1982, the sex industry on Katendrecht was shut down, with sex workers being displaced once again. In the following years, sex workers moved to new locations, including the G.J. de Jonghweg and the Keileweg. The Keileweg, situated in an industrial remote port area, became known for its “tippelzone” – a zone where sex work occurred in public view, with clients often interacting with sex workers through car windows. This tippelzone at Keileweg remained in operation until 2005, marking the end of visible sex work in Rotterdam.

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²⁶ Rijnmond. (2021, December 20). Tippelzone Keileweg gesloten. *Rijnmond*. <https://www.rijnmond.nl/nieuws/51225/tippelzone-keileweg-gesloten>

Method

Introduction method

This research combines a literature study on the history of Rotterdam, case study analysis, and research into the needs and challenges of sex workers in order to conduct interviews with sex workers using photo elicitation. The aim is to develop spatial design principles that respond to these needs and challenges and to explore how these principles can be applied within the context of Rotterdam. The different components of the research build on one another: insights from the contextual and literature analysis form the basis for a spatial catalogue, which is then used as a tool during the interviews. The input from the interviews directly informs the formulation of the final design recommendations.

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the research method. The following sections detail the methodological steps taken, outlining how the context analysis, case studies, literature research, and interviews were conducted and how they informed the development of the spatial design principles.

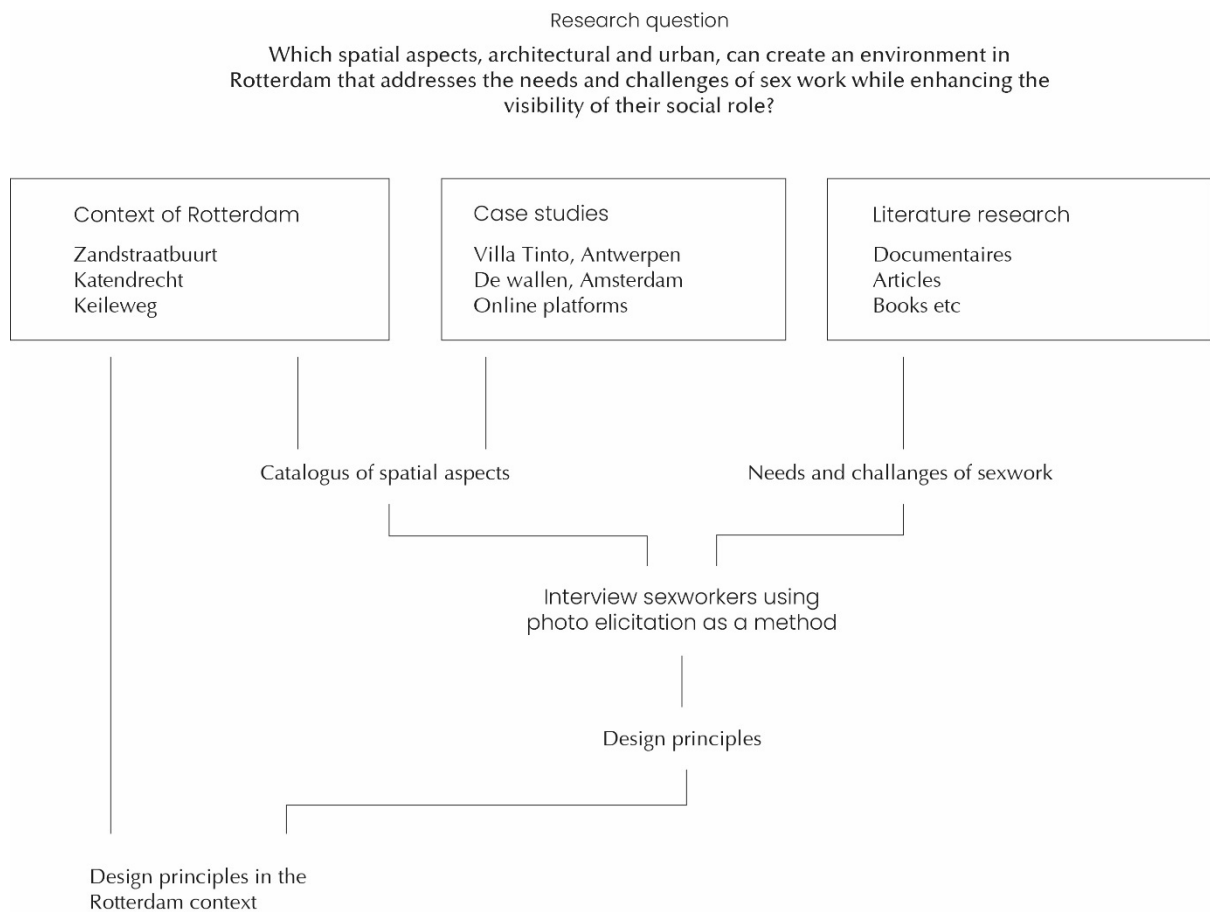


Figure 2 Research Framework: Developing Spatial Design Principles for Sex Work in Rotterdam

Context analysis

The methodology includes a context analysis of Rotterdam, with specific attention given to locations such as the Zandstraatbuurt, Katendrecht, and Keileweg. These locations were selected due to their historical and spatial relevance in relation to sex work.

Needs and challenges

The needs and challenges identified in Chapter 1 served as a framework for developing the interview questions and guided the thematic focus during the discussions with sex workers. These insights reflect the current spatial and social issues surrounding sex work in Rotterdam.

The following core values were central to the research:

- **Community:** Strengthening support networks
- **Safety:** Minimizing risks of violence and ensuring security.
- **Independence:** Enabling autonomy over work and decision-making.
- **Belonging:** Reducing stigma and promoting social inclusion.
- **Privacy:** Protecting identities and personal boundaries.
- **Accessibility:** Ensuring ease of access for all users.
- **Inclusivity:** Accommodating diverse identities and experiences.

These values informed both the interview process and the evaluation of spatial design principles.

Catalogue of spatial aspects & case studies

The context of sex work in Rotterdam provides insight into the various forms and settings in which sex work has been practiced in Rotterdam. These spatial aspects have been categorized according to different scales. These scales are

introduced to make a distinction between various spatial experiences at various levels. To explore what spatial aspects could be part of a future solution to the problem, next to the context and history of Rotterdam, cases from other cities in the Netherlands and abroad have also been examined. Well-known cities within the sex work industry include Amsterdam and Hamburg, while relevant spatial insights can also be drawn from places such as Utrecht and Antwerp. The catalogue is shown in Table 1.

Urban context		Typology	Interaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historic centre 	city	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erotic centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Window
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Port area with industry 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common room with private rooms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Car window
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Port area with residential area 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult entertainment rooms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online window
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Border area 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standalone place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indoor space
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residential area 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drive-in/tippelzone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community/colleagues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature/water 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial zone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business cards

Table 1 Catalogue of spatial aspects of sex work

This collection of spatial aspects is divided into three scales:

- **Urban context:** focuses on surroundings, the place within the city, and the type or combination of land uses, such as residential, industrial, or commercial areas.
- **Typology:** concerns the type of space and the type of sex work that takes place in that space. It also includes the configuration of spaces or whether it is a standalone space.
- **Interaction:** addresses the way sex workers and clients interact, mainly during the first encounter, but it can also include the entire paid interaction.

Photo elicitation

To gather insights from sex workers regarding how architectural features influence their perceptions of sex workspaces, photo elicitation was used during the interviews. Photo elicitation is a qualitative research method that involves using photographs to prompt discussion and elicit deeper responses during interviews. Originally introduced by John Collier Jr., the method is based on the idea that images can evoke memories, emotions, and associations that may not emerge through verbal questioning alone.²⁷

A study from the United States by Capous-Desyllas and Forro served as a key inspiration for considering the use photo input in this research, as it demonstrates the value of participatory visual methods in amplifying the voices and

²⁷ Evans-Pritchard, D., Collier, J., & Collier, M. (1987). Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research method. *Western Folklore*, 46(3), 220. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1499536>

lived experiences of sex workers.²⁸ However, their photovoice projects also revealed several challenges, including difficulties in participant recruitment, the need for long-term engagement through multiple sessions, and a high risk of participant dropout. To address these limitations, this research adopts a more accessible variation: photo elicitation. In this method, the researcher provides the visual material, allowing for rich discussion within a single interview session and reducing the burden on participants.

In this research, illustrations rather than photographs were used as visual representations of spatial aspects. The illustrations were intentionally simplified and generalized, in contrast to images of specific locations, in order to minimize personal associations with particular cities or sites. This approach aimed to encourage participants to respond to the spatial characteristics themselves, rather than to the context or identity of a recognisable place.

The illustrations used in the interviews are visual representations derived from the spatial catalogue presented in Table 1. Each card shown to participants included an illustration, a brief description, and, on the reverse side, a photographic example to provide additional visual context when necessary. Figure 3 displays the front side of the cards, while Figures 4 through 6 present overviews of the spatial aspects, organized according to the three analytical scales.

²⁸ Capous-Desyllas, M., & Forro, V. A. (2014). Tensions, challenges, and lessons learned: Methodological reflections from two photovoice projects with sex workers. *Journal of Community Practice*, 22(1–2), 150–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2014.901269>

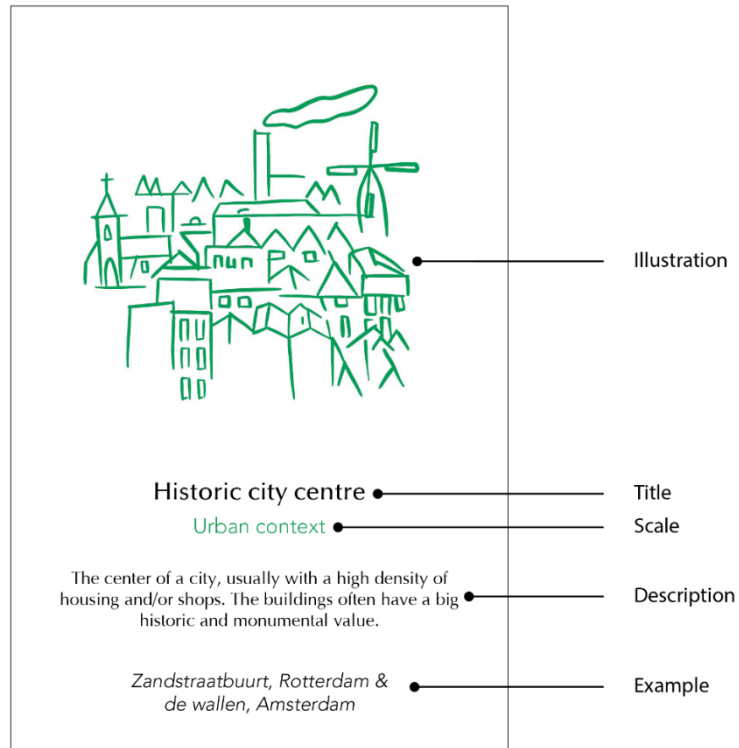


Figure 3 Contents of card used for photo elicitation.



Historic city centre

Urban context

The center of a city, usually with a high density of housing and/or shops. The buildings often have a big historic and monumental value.

Zandstraatbuurt, Rotterdam &
de wallen, Amsterdam

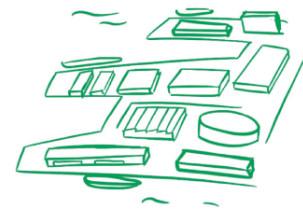


Port area with residential buildings

Urban context

An area in the city by the water with silos, warehouses, and boats, located next to residential buildings.

Katendrecht, Rotterdam

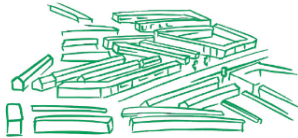


Port area with industry

Urban Context

An waterfront area with silos, warehouses, boats, and predominantly factories, offices, and other facilities supporting the port industry.

Keilewerf, Rotterdam

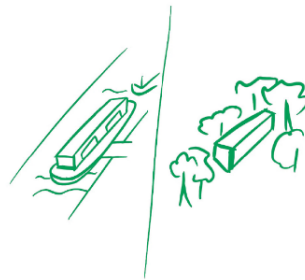


Residential area

Urban Context

An area in the city primarily composed of residential buildings.

Schipperskwartier, Antwerpen

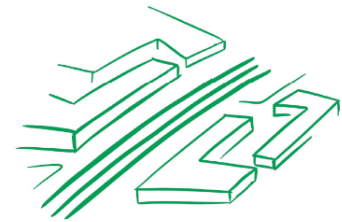


On the water/in nature

Urban context

Houseboats on the water, or a location next to or within a nature reserve.

Zandpad, Utrecht



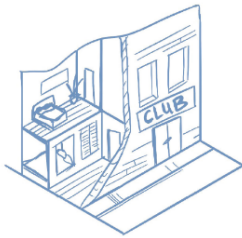
Border area

Urban context

An area on the edge of different neighborhoods and next to a busy road or train track.

Afwerklods, Nijmegen
& Bokkingshang, Deventer

Figure 4 Overview Spatial Aspects Urban Context



Common room with private rooms

Spatial principle

This is a shared space where sex workers and clients can meet before potentially moving to a more private room.

*Cafe/ Club / Privatehouse / Brothel
Dancing Walhalla, Katendrecht*

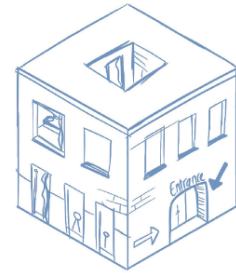


Tourist area /commercial zone

Spatial principle

This is an outdoor area where, in addition to sex work, other services and products are offered, such as sex shops, strip clubs, and cafes.

*Red light district/ windowprostitution/ sexshops
Reeperbahn, Hamburg & de Wallen, Amsterdam*

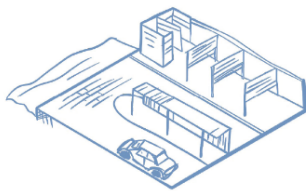


Erotic centre

Spatial principle

This is an (indoor) space where various types of sex work are offered, potentially accompanied by other activities and performances.

Villa Tinto, Antwerpen

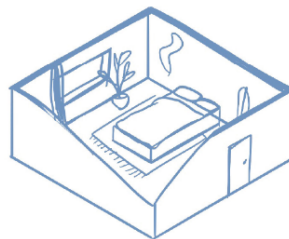


Drive- in (tippelzone)

Spatial principle

This is primarily an outdoor area where clients typically arrive by car to meet a sex worker. There are often panels provided to park the car, offering some privacy.

Keileweg, Rotterdam



Standalone space

Spatial principle

This is a room on it self in a house, hotel or a (private) sauna.

Home, hotel, sauna



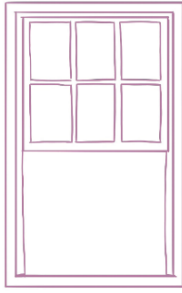
Adult entertainment room

Spatial principle

This is a space where the primary purpose is entertainment or information, such as a sex theater, peep show, or exhibition room.

Casa Rosso, Amsterdam

Figure 5 Overview Spatial Aspects Typology



Window

Interaction

The first interaction will take place on the border of interior and exterior space, through and around a window. This can be a window in between or in a doorframe.

Windowprostitution



Online window

Interaction

This interaction occurs via a website, app or other forms of online advertising of sexwork and also includes webcam services and porn videos.

Kinky.nl



Car window

Interaction

This interaction takes place through a car window, where the sex worker stands on the sidewalk, and the customer drives by and rolls down their window.

Tippelzone, Keileweg



Indoor space

Interaction

This interaction occurs within the safety of an indoor space, which may be a public area but is typically a location specifically designed for such interactions.

in White's, Rotterdam



Business cards

Interaction

A discreet networking tool used at select events to promote services professionally.

Business card of accounting



Colleagues /community

Interaction

A network of sex workers who share vetted clients and opportunities, often through chat groups, to support each other and streamline work.

Online chats/ community organisations like PIC

Figure 6 Overview Spatial Aspects Interaction

Interviews with sexworkers

This research specifically focuses on the perspectives of the sex workers themselves and what they consider important in the design of such spaces. It is assumed that, in their responses, sex workers may take into account the interests of others, such as clients and neighbours, but the focus remains on their own spatial needs and preferences.

In total, three interviews were conducted. Participants were recruited through social media and the Prostitution Information Centre in Amsterdam. The sex workers interviewed were involved in various sectors, including adult entertainment video, escort, online platforms, and clubs.

All participants gave informed consent and were anonymized in the data. Their names are known to the author but are not published in this paper to protect their privacy.

Each interview began with a general introduction to the project and the concept of a new type of sex workspace. Participants were first invited to describe the type of sex work they engage in and the conditions of their current work environment. The discussion then moved toward spatial topics, structured around the three scales of the spatial catalogue: urban context, typology, and interaction. The corresponding cards, as shown in Figures 4 to 6, were then presented to the interviewees, who were encouraged to interpret them freely and share their thoughts and preferences. In most cases, participants spontaneously ranked the cards from most to least preferred, providing explanations for their choices. When this did not occur naturally, they were asked to do so. At each scale, participants were also invited to reflect on whether any important spatial aspects were missing from the examples provided.

In most interviews, the typology scale triggered the most in-depth reflections about all needs and challenge. Additionally, attention was given to identifying multiple needs and challenges raised by the interviewees. For example, if the conversation focused on safety and privacy, questions would be asked to explore their views on accessibility or inclusivity as well. Interviews generally lasted around 40 minutes, often ending once answers began to repeat.

Results

Urban context

Accessibility facilities

Interviewee 2 raised concerns about locations in or near natural areas, particularly regarding accessibility in case of emergencies:

“Especially if something happens, like an accident with a client. Since I don’t drive, it becomes a problem if there is no nearby access to civilization.”

Although emergency response times in Rotterdam are generally within 10 to 15 minutes, the perception of isolation can still affect a sense of security. Industrial zones closer to the city may meet objective criteria for access but can still be perceived as remote.

Conclusion: While physical accessibility may be adequate in most urban areas, perceived remoteness, especially in green or port zones, can negatively impact the feeling of safety among sex workers.

In the water/ close by nature

Both Interviewee 2 and 3 expressed positive associations with natural environments. Interviewee 3 noted:

“Nature-oriented spaces might benefit workers’ well-being.”

While such environments were viewed as calming or pleasant, fully isolated natural settings raised concerns, especially related to emergency response and public access.

Conclusion: Incorporating green or waterfront elements into urban locations is desirable, but these should remain well-connected to city infrastructure.

Visibility by residents

Participants expressed mixed views on visibility in residential settings. Interviewee 2 reflected:

“In more upscale residential areas, people may be more inclined to watch from their windows,”

while Interviewee 3 added:

“Nobody wants any kind of sex work around their kids, their businesses, etc.”

This suggests tension between community presence and privacy in residential zones. In Rotterdam, neighbourhoods like Blijdorp or Kralingen, with strong residential identities, may therefore be less suitable for sex workspaces.

Conclusion: Areas with high residential density or family-oriented functions are likely to provoke resistance and may conflict with sex workers’ need for discretion.

Public transport distance

Concerns were also raised about the travel distance to and from port areas. Interviewee 2 noted:

“It’s isolated, and it can be far away from public transport or far by bike. If getting to a client’s location takes more than an hour, it becomes a difficult and inconvenient journey.”

In Rotterdam, some port areas are indeed poorly connected to public transit and located far from the city centre,

particularly those used for logistics and industry. However, areas such as M4Haven and Delfshaven offer better connectivity and remain linked to the city's urban fabric while still maintaining a waterfront character.

Conclusion: Port areas with existing mixed-use functions and improved transport access may offer a good option for visibility, accessibility, and character.

Visibility and Belonging in the Urban Fabric

Interviewee 1 was critical of increased visibility as a strategy for normalisation:

"The problems stem from power dynamics and people's inability to openly communicate their feelings."

In contrast, Interviewee 3 argued that visibility could reduce stigma and increase safety:

"Visibility normalizes sex work, encouraging open discussion and improving safety."

They added that in historic city centres, such as in Amsterdam, sex work blends into the public realm and contributes to a sense of place.

In Rotterdam, this model is harder to replicate due to the lack of a preserved historic core with window prostitution. However, mixed-use residential and commercial zones such as Delfshaven or Wijnhaven might offer similar potential:

"Such spaces would diffuse tourist crowds and integrate sex work into the city."

Conclusion: Visibility remains a contested value among sex workers, but well-integrated, mixed-use environments may offer a balanced approach, especially in the absence of a traditional red-light district.

Typology

Integrated mixed- used solution in the urban-fabric.

Interviewee 2 highlighted the benefits of a mixed commercial environment, stating:

“This setup doesn’t create a divide; it’s more of a mixed-use space, blending in with other activities. It’s beneficial because you’re in a place where people are already around, so they don’t have to search, which makes communication quicker.”

Interviewee 3 agreed and referred positively to the situation in Amsterdam, where windows are integrated into areas with other businesses. Both respondents valued how such settings facilitate discretion, accessibility, and social inclusion.

Conclusion: Sex workers favour integrated, mixed-use environments that promote natural social flow and reduce spatial segregation. These spaces support visibility without isolation and contribute to a feeling of belonging and independency.

Flexible and diverse range of spaces

There was no single preferred program or function across participants, but adaptability was a recurring theme. Interviewee 1 described the potential value of spaces that educate or inform the public, referencing exhibitions that communicate warmth, safety, and the business aspects of sex work. Interviewee 2 added:

“What’s important for me is that the sex workers should have control over the space’s design and how it’s organized.”

Rather than fixed typologies, the interviewees pointed to the need for a diverse range of spatial options, adaptable to different users and changing needs over time.

Conclusion: The spatial program should allow for flexibility and co-creation. Empowering sex workers to influence design decisions is key to fostering independence and long-term usability.

Central building/options in workspace

The idea of a single, centralised facility was met with scepticism. Concerns included a lack of anonymity, reduced independence, and unwanted visibility. Interviewee 1, for instance, preferred working in varied settings such as private saunas, hotels, or client homes, stating:

“These locations give me flexibility and make it possible to keep my private life and work separately.”

Some criticism was aimed specifically at the design of Amsterdam’s proposed erotic centre by Moke Architecten.²⁹ Respondents mentioned issues such as physical isolation, long circulation routes, and a lack of windows to the outside. These factors were perceived as problematic in terms of safety, accessibility, and psychological well-being.

Conclusion: Centralised typologies may be useful in certain cases, but only if they avoid physical and social isolation. Sex workers’ autonomy and the ability to navigate freely within and beyond the space must be preserved.

Access to the street/ human-scale

The visual connection between the workspace and the street is another aspect that came up.

Interviewee 2 underlined the importance of physical and visual access to the outside world:

²⁹ 016_portfolio/erotisch-centrum — Moke Architecten. (2020). MOKE LOVE. <https://www.mokearchitecten.nl/portfolio/erotisch-centrum>

“Having windows to the outside allows sex workers to feel connected to the world, it gives us a sense of freedom, even if it’s just for a break.”

Being situated on higher floors in closed-off buildings was seen as problematic, as it reduces a sense of control and makes spontaneous exits or contact with others more difficult.

Conclusion: A human-scaled design with direct access to the street supports a stronger sense of freedom, spatial control, and psychological safety.

Interaction

Physical window and online window

Of all the aspects of interaction, the physical window and the online window are most often discussed, with safety and inclusivity being the dominant themes across the scale of interaction.

A physical window serves as a layer in between, a way to interact with and assess the client, and also vice versa. An online window allows sex workers to vet and chat with clients beforehand, though this does not guarantee safety. Traditional window sex work is seen as inclusive because anyone can rent a window without being filtered out. The online window, through platforms like social media and personal websites, is also becoming more inclusive, but remains shaped by platform policies that often block or restrict sexual content, and it requires ongoing visual marketing and profile management.

Interviewee 2 on working behind a window:

“Windows are dynamic and often suit quick, straightforward interactions, but they don’t align with my preference for taking time in communication.”

Interviewee 3 highlighted the role of visibility:

“Windows provide visibility and security. The online visibility of diverse bodies and sexualities has improved, but challenges remain.”

Online interaction also comes with limitations. **Interviewee 1** explained how sex work-related posts are increasingly being removed from platforms. Still, online presence is seen as essential:

“Being online is crucial for my independence. It allows me to earn money without relying on an agency or intermediary.”

Conclusion: Both the physical and online windows have their own strengths and limitations. The physical window allows for spontaneous contact and is accessible with a low barrier to entry. The online window offers more independence and reach, but comes with visibility pressure and safety concerns.

It depends on who the sex worker is and how they prefer to work. Supporting multiple working models is important to provide real choice and flexibility.

Community

Community, both online and offline, plays a key role in how sex workers connect with each other and with clients. **Interviewees 2 and 3** emphasized that peer support networks are important for sharing information, opportunities, and safety strategies.

Interviewee 2 explained:

“It’s like a community effort, where we share opportunities and information with each other, often through chat groups. It’s a common way to stay connected and help each other out.”

Community is an essential part of sex work, offering practical and emotional support. Whether online or in person, these networks help sex workers stay connected, collaborate, and

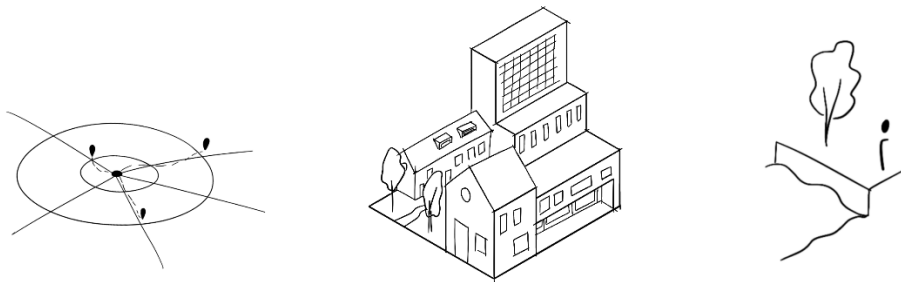
build resilience. Design processes should take these social structures seriously and find ways to support and strengthen them.

Conclusion

This research has explored how spatial design can support the safety, autonomy, and well-being of sex workers, focusing on three key scales: urban context, building typology, and interaction. Based on interviews and spatial analysis, a set of design principles has been developed and visualised to inform future planning and design interventions.

Urban context – design principles

The urban context plays a crucial role in shaping sex workers' sense of safety, accessibility, and belonging. The location of workspaces, whether central or remote, visible or hidden,



directly affects how sex work is experienced in the city.

1. Central Location with Access to Public Transport and Emergency Services

Although emergency response times in Rotterdam are generally acceptable, locations that feel remote, such as natural or industrial areas, can negatively affect sex workers' sense of safety. Public transport access is also a concern, especially in more isolated port zones. Areas like M4Haven and Delfshaven are better connected and still part of the urban fabric.

2. Mixed-Use Areas

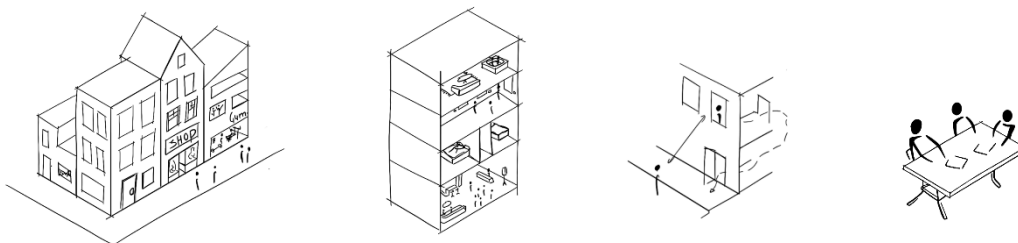
High-density residential neighbourhoods, especially family-oriented ones like Blijdorp and Kralingen, were considered unsuitable due to tension with residents and concerns around discretion. In contrast, mixed-use areas that combine living, working, and commercial functions, such as Delfshaven or Wijnhaven, were seen as more fitting and better able to support visibility and inclusion.

3. Nature and Water in Balance with Accessibility

Natural and waterfront environments were associated with calmness and well-being. However, when too isolated, they raise concerns about access to emergency services and general connectivity. Well-connected green or waterfront locations are preferred, where the benefits of nature do not come at the cost of safety or access.

Typology – design principles

The form and function of the building itself influence how sex workers experience autonomy, visibility, and safety. Participants stressed the importance of integration, adaptability, and control over the spatial layout.



1. Blending into the Existing Environment

Mixed-use environments that integrate naturally with surrounding activities are preferred. These settings help avoid spatial segregation and enable smoother communication by placing sex work in areas where people are already present. Integration into existing commercial zones promotes discretion, accessibility, and social inclusion.

2. Mixed-Use Program Within the Building

A flexible and diverse program is essential. Rather than prescribing a fixed function, spaces should accommodate a range of uses, such as information-sharing or public engagement. Central to this is the ability for sex workers to have control over how spaces are designed and organised, allowing for adaptation to different needs over time.

3. Connection with the Street

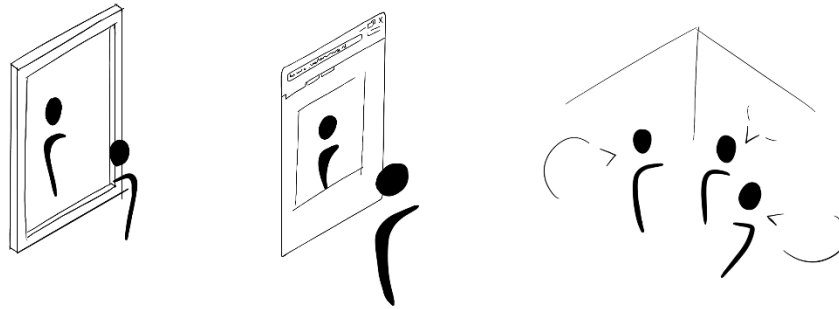
Direct visual and physical connection to the street strengthens the sense of freedom and spatial control. Access to daylight and the outside world contributes to psychological safety. In contrast, enclosed upper-floor locations with no external contact are seen as limiting and disempowering.

4. Participation from Sex Workers

Essential is the ability for sex workers to have control over how spaces are designed and organised, allowing for adaptation to different needs over time. Involvement of sex workers in the design process is essential to ensure independence and usability.

Interaction – design principles

Forms of interaction, both physical and digital, shape the daily practice of sex work. Preferences vary, and supporting different models is essential to ensure safety, independence, and flexibility.



1. Physical Window

The physical window is a commonly discussed form of interaction. It functions as a layer between sex worker and client, enabling mutual observation and low-threshold contact. It is accessible and seen as inclusive, as anyone can rent a window. However, it does not suit all sexworkers.

2. Online Window

The online window allows for advance contact with clients and offers independence, though it doesn't guarantee safety. Visibility online means maintaining a presence requires continuous self-promotion and management.

3. Community Importance

Community networks, both online and offline, are vital for

sharing information, opportunities, and safety tips. These peer networks, often maintained through chat groups, offer connection and mutual support and are a key part of daily practice for many sex workers.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how spatial and architectural aspects of work environments relate to the needs and experiences of sex workers. While the research yielded valuable insights, several limitations and contextual factors must be acknowledged in interpreting the findings.

The most significant point of discussion concerns the limited representation of sex workers specifically based in Rotterdam. Reaching this group proved to be a considerable challenge. Attempts to connect with sex workers through the Door2Door organization, run for and by sex workers, as well as through personal outreach via social media, resulted in little to no response or willingness to participate.

I attended the Sex Workers' Pride in Rotterdam and consulted their website and social media channels to gain an understanding of the scope and nature of their activities. However, these sources did not provide specific insights into how architectural aspects relate to the needs and challenges faced by sex workers.

The sex workers I interviewed were based in various cities across the Netherlands. While this may offer a degree of general relevance to the Rotterdam context, it is possible that location-specific nuances were missed.

Through qualitative research conducted via interviews with three sex workers, this study provides detailed and valuable insights into their perspectives and needs regarding their workspaces. Although the participants were involved in different types of sex work, or a mix of these, the limited scope of this study means that the findings should not be seen as representative of the average sex worker, if such a category can be defined at all.

Despite these limitations, the findings offer a meaningful contribution to understanding sex workers' spatial experiences and the role of design in their needs, like safety and a feeling of belonging. A valuable follow-up study would involve validating the proposed design principles with a broader and more locally specific group of sex workers to further validate the outcomes in the Rotterdam context.

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Photos History and context of sex work in Rotterdam:

On the foreground, the Zandstraatbuurt

Stadsarchief Rotterdam, 1913-1915

Photo by Cornelis (C.) Vreedenburgh

Dance salon in de Mosterdsteeg.

Stadsarchief Rotterdam, 1912.

Photo by Henry Berssenbrugg

Café 'Het Paard in de Wieg' on Rodezand.

Stadarchief Rotterdam, 1941

Drawing by A. Ph. de la Rivière.

Luchtopname van Katendrecht met bedrijventerreinen en woningen.

stadsarchief Rotterdam, 1937

Photo from KLM Aerocarto

Buurtbewoners van Katendrecht gooien ruiten in van
bordelen en clubs.

Nationaal Archief/Anefo 1974

Photo by Hans Peters

Katendrecht Rotterdam. Matrozen op het Deliplein.

Nationaal Archief

Photo by Tholens, C.M. (Cock)

Buurtbewoners demonstreren tegen Eroscentrum in
Rotterdam

Stadsarchief Rotterdam, 1979

Luchtfoto m4h

Photo by John Gundlach

Afwerkplaats, Keileweg

By zwartwit010

De Rosse Rafelrand - G.J. de Jonghweg

Photographer: Martijn Heil