

A SPACE OF INSPIRATION

REVITALIZING ARCHITECTURE
IN THE NETHERLANDS

Conclusion of Research

Explore Lab Graduation Studio | TU Delft

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Thesis Reflection

This reflection examines the process and outcomes of my graduation project, which aimed to define the conditions for a creative space to revitalize Dutch architecture by providing opportunities for younger architectural practices to experiment and exhibit their work.

Relation to Master Track and Programme

The Architecture track emphasizes critical thinking about the role of architecture in society, exploring innovative design approaches, and engaging with contemporary challenges within the built environment. My project directly addresses the perceived stagnation in Dutch architecture, as highlighted by Betsky and Van Eig, and proposes a proactive spatial solution to foster innovation and experimentation – key concerns within the architectural discourse explored in the architecture track. The research involved a case study of multiple architectural projects, analysed on their goals, context, design approach and impact. The design involves a proposal for the redevelopment of a harbour district and the transformation of a former gasholder and factory. This design is developed through an architectural, urban, technological, social and sustainable perspective.

Influence of Research on Design and Vice Versa

The research, primarily conducted through comparative case studies of biennales, museum parks, and creative districts, created the fundamentals for the design. The analysis of scale & context in cases like Hembrug, Keilewerf and Parc de la Villette informed the decision to integrate the new space within the existing industrial context of the M4H district, respecting its history while introducing new functions. The study of spatial configuration & movement in the Venice Biennale and Insel Hombroich inspired the idea of a central anchor (Ferro dome) and dispersed, adaptable pavilions, fostering both focused and exploratory experiences. The investigation into atmosphere in cases like the Keilewerf and Insel Hombroich highlighted the importance of flexible exhibition spaces and the potential of existing industrial structures to create unique ambiances. Adaptability & flexibility, exemplified by Keilewerf and the Bienal de São Paulo, directly led to the concept of relocatable pavilions and adaptable office spaces. The analysis of user involvement in the Bienal de São Paulo and Parc de la Villette underscored the need for a biennial event to engage a wider audience and promote the work of the participating practices. Finally, the threats analysis, particularly regarding gentrification and environmental

impact, directly shaped the design's focus on material reuse and the selection of phytoremediation as a sustainable site intervention.

Conversely, the emerging design concepts also influenced the research. As the idea of a park with adaptable pavilions within the M4H district began to solidify, it prompted a more focused analysis of the specific characteristics of that urban context, particularly its industrial history, redevelopment plans, and potential structures to transform. The ambition to create a circular design led to a deeper exploration of adaptive reuse. These extra studies brought led to meetings with various people involved in the redevelopment of the M4H district and experts in circular design, giving valuable insights in these subjects. This iterative process between research and design allowed for a more grounded and contextually relevant proposal.

Assessment of Way of Working

My approach, characterized by a comparative case study analysis followed by a site-specific design proposal, offered a structured way to address the research question. The chosen methods – literature review, case study analysis, and conceptual design – provided a framework for understanding existing precedents and translating those learnings into a concrete spatial proposition. The methodology allowed for the identification of key design conditions based on the successes and challenges of comparable spaces.

However, my way of working also had limitations. The initial phase of case study selection could have been more precisely justified. While the chosen cases offered diverse perspectives, a more systematic categorization based on specific criteria (e.g., focus on emerging talent, experimental architecture, urban regeneration) might have led to a more focused and potentially more insightful analysis.

Furthermore, the amount of work that was needed to complete the case study analysis was greatly underestimated, resulting in less in-depth literature research as planned.

Assessment of Academic and Societal Value, Scope, and Implications (Including Ethical Aspects)

Academic Value: By analyzing existing models and proposing a new framework for supporting emerging architectural practices, this graduation project offers a potential contribution to the understanding of how to cultivate a more dynamic and experimental architectural landscape.

The project also touches upon themes of urban regeneration, adaptive reuse, and sustainable practices, connecting to broader academic discussions within urban studies and architectural design.

Societal Value: The project holds potential societal value by addressing a perceived stagnation in Dutch architecture and proposing a mechanism to bring fresh ideas and talent into the field. By supporting younger practices, the project could contribute to a more diverse and responsive architectural output, potentially leading to more innovative and contextually relevant built environments in the future. The focus on material reuse and sustainable site interventions also aligns with growing societal concerns about environmental responsibility. However, the societal value remains somewhat speculative as the project is a conceptual design. Further engagement with stakeholders (e.g., young architects, policymakers, cultural institutions) would be necessary to validate its potential impact and ensure its relevance to the needs of the architectural community and wider society.

Scope and Implications: The scope of the project is focused on the Dutch architectural context, specifically addressing the challenges faced by younger practices. However, the underlying principles of creating dedicated spaces for experimentation and exhibition could be transferable to other national or regional contexts facing similar issues in their architectural development. Furthermore, the strategies used to tackle several challenges in the M4H district, concerning polluted soil and gentrification, could be implemented in similar harbour districts undergoing a redevelopment.

Ethical Aspects: The project implicitly addresses ethical considerations by advocating for a more equitable playing field for younger architects and promoting sustainable practices. By focusing on material reuse and phytoremediation, it suggests a commitment to environmentally responsible design. However, the project could have more explicitly addressed potential ethical challenges related to gentrification in the M4H district. While the design aims to integrate with the existing context, the introduction of a significant cultural and economic driver like the proposed space could inadvertently contribute to rising property values and displacement. A more thorough consideration of these potential social impacts and the development of mitigation strategies would have strengthened the ethical dimension of the project.

Assessment of Transferability of Project Results

The core principles and strategies identified in this project have a degree of transferability to other contexts. The methodology of analysing existing creative spaces and translating those learnings into design conditions could be applied to different sectors or geographical locations aiming to foster innovation. The concept of a hybrid space combining experimentation, exhibition, and collaboration could be adapted for other creative disciplines. The emphasis on adaptability, material reuse, and community engagement are also broadly applicable principles in contemporary design.

However, the specific design proposal is deeply rooted in the unique context of Rotterdam's M4H district, its industrial history, and the specific challenges and opportunities within the Dutch architectural landscape. Direct replication of the design in a different context would likely be inappropriate without a thorough analysis of the local conditions, existing infrastructure, and specific needs of the target users. The success of the biennial model is also contingent on the specific cultural and institutional landscape in which it operates. Therefore, while the underlying principles are transferable, the specific design solution is more context-dependent.

Developed Reflection Questions

1. Considering the focus on providing opportunities for younger architectural practices, how might the proposed space and its biennial event specifically cater to the unique needs and challenges faced by firms in their early stages of development, beyond simply providing a physical location for experimentation and exhibition?

The proposed space could specifically cater to younger architectural practices in several ways. Firstly, the material pavilion could provide storage space for harvested materials and offer access to shared tools and equipment, reducing individual overhead costs. The park as experimentation ground gives the opportunity to design pavilions that can actually add value to the developing neighbourhood. If promoted right, this could create funding options. Furthermore, the biennial event could feature dedicated platforms for emerging talent, such as mentorship programs connecting them with established architects, workshops on business development and marketing tailored to their needs, and networking opportunities with potential clients and collaborators who might be more willing to take risks on newer firms. Furthermore, the curatorial focus of the biennial could actively seek out and promote experimental work that challenges conventional norms, which is often a hallmark of younger, less established practices.

2. Considering the long-term viability of the design, how durable is the functional assignment of the central pavilion (offices, flexible spaces) and the material pavilion (storage, workshop) against potential shifts in the needs of the architectural practices and the broader architectural landscape? What is the inherent adaptability within these structures to accommodate alternative uses should their initial functions become less relevant?

The need for office space for participating firms is likely to remain constant, although the size and layout requirements of these offices might change as practices grow, shrink, or collaborate differently. The demand for flexible spaces for presentations, meetings, and exhibitions is also likely to persist as these are essential for knowledge sharing and showcasing work. The biennial event provides a recurring anchor for the exhibition spaces.

The design emphasizes adaptability within the central pavilion. The modular office construction allows for reconfiguration and resizing of individual workspaces. The flexible spaces are intended to be multi-functional, capable of hosting various events and activities. Should the demand for traditional office space decrease, these areas could be repurposed into larger co-working zones, educational spaces or even temporary housing. The open structure of the Ferro dome itself offers a high degree of spatial flexibility for future re-imagining.

