

PIGGYBACK POLITICS

P4 Reflection paper



Details:

Piggyback Politics

Merging civic interaction with an infrastructural commodity

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AMS MID CITY 2050 Studio
February 2018 - January 2019

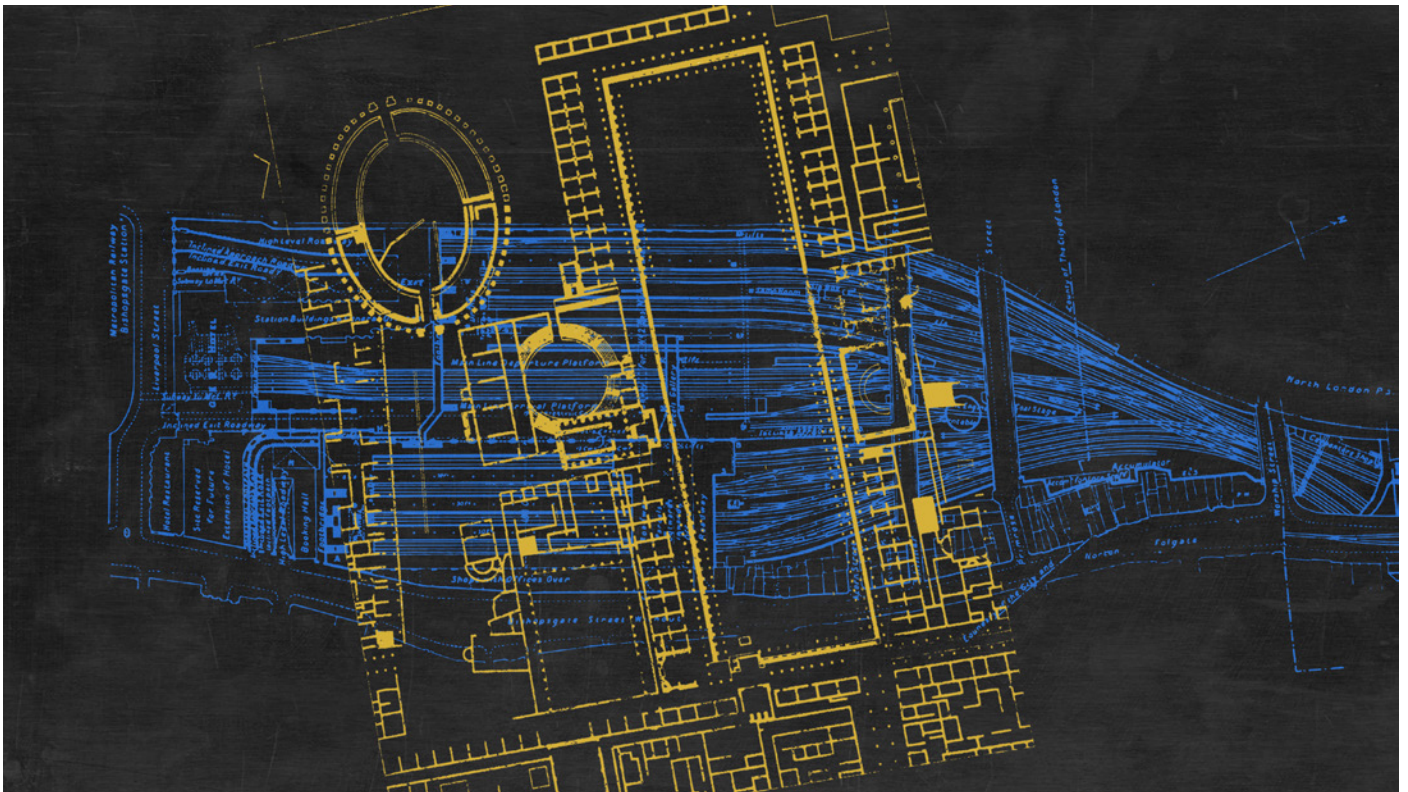


Image 0.01: *Superimposition of the Roman Forum onto Liverpool Street Station (London). This first idea collage was created for PO.5 at the beginning of the project, to capture the initial fascination of the project.*

Project description

The site of Duivendrecht station presents a very contemporary issue many cities are currently facing; existing heavy infrastructure, in this case train and metro tracks in particular, have an immense impact on urban life and its communities. In the immediate context, the impact of the infrastructure space creates two separate problems. Firstly, there is a clear segregation of two existing neighbourhoods, which becomes very clear when looking at quantitative data like housing typology, housing prices and median income, but also by using qualitative data such as photos taken on site that show a dramatic disconnect through atmosphere and the way public space is used. Secondly, the excessive impact of the train tracks is halting potential development of the area. Amsterdam is looking to build roughly 70.000 homes by 2050 and the site of Duivendrecht station has the potential to develop 2km² of land in an inner-city location.

The project proposes to redevelop the station itself as an intervention that addresses both of the previously mentioned issues. On an urban scale by using the remodelling the station to create the necessary momentum to start developing its immediate surroundings, the project simultaneously creates a financial impetus to invest in reducing the impact of the rail infrastructure by constructing a new tunnel for the north-south direction. Secondly the goal is to conceptualise the station itself as a social condenser that has a relevance on the local (its immediate context) as the larger context (the people that use the station as a temporary destination). Therefore the projects rebrands the station as Amsterdam Forum.

The Forum is seen as an architectural intervention that becomes part of the station typology, bringing together people that interact with the building as an amenity on a local scale together with people that interact with the building as a commuter on a metropolitan or national scale. In order for the Forum to be successful simply writing Forum on an empty square would obviously be foolish. To gain a certain momentum in the Forum, the programmatic strategy relies on supportive programming. An important source of inspiration was the ancient Greek Agora, the central space of public (= political) life. The Agora consisted of clearly defined programs, that all revolved around daily routine, around a series of public spaces. These squares and stoas became the location of public interaction. In a similar way the interstitial space of the station will be defined by additional program that is intended to stimulate the social interactions and provoke ideas or opinions. The central Forum will unite the different programs, while doubling up as the access to the different platforms, once again affirming the symbiotic relationship between the different programmatic features of the station-forum hybrid.

This hybridisation of typologies, is what the project considers to be the “piggyback principle”: attaching the desired (i.e. offline social interaction and public awareness of current affairs) onto the station typology (i.e. an urban amenity with a relevance on different scales), the Forum is able to feed off of the infrastructural necessity of the new station. This adds a new relevance to the position of the station in the metropolitan context, far beyond what a traditional redesign of the building would have been able to realise

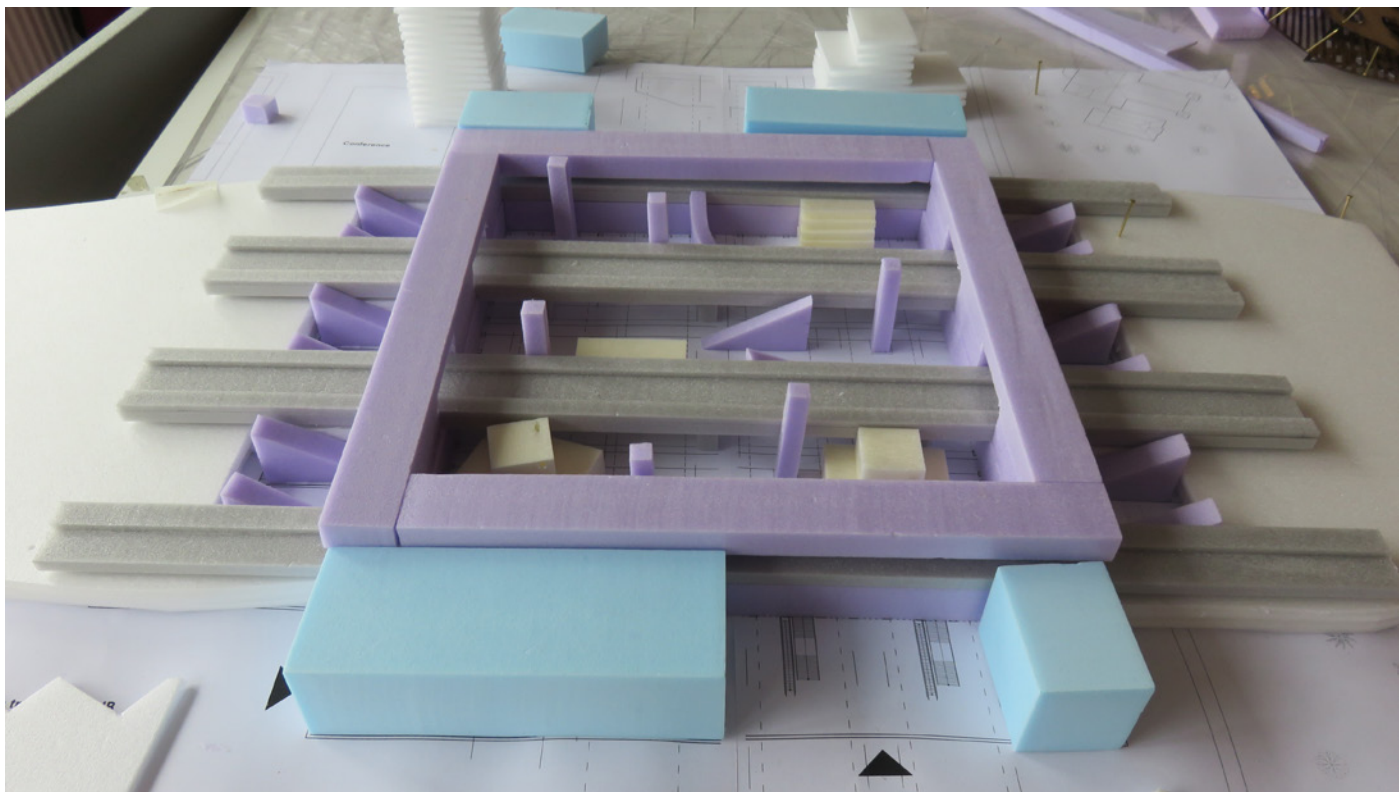


Image 0.02: Study and working model to test the relationship between the courtyard (i.e. the Forum), the traintracks (grey foam), the Arcade (purple foam) and the supportive programs (blue and white foam) within a rough context model.

Research and design

During the course of the studio, in particular up to P2, there was a lot of room to explore personal fascinations when they arose within the framework of the studio. Through comparative research the studio challenges students to use hard (quantitative) and soft (qualitative with more room for personal interpretation) data alongside typological and morphological research. The soft data in particular gave me the opportunity to dive into several fascinations I had developed over the course of the studio. These topics—The development of the station as an urban amenity, The information technology transition, Dutch politics and Spaces of congregation—are all retracable in the proposal currently under development. The supplementary lectures provided by the seminars City of Innovations and New Urban Questions, and mainly the essays that were written for these courses (‘On the notion of centrality’ and ‘Where urban and digital meet’ respectively) all provided the means to situate the proposal in a broader context that helps formulating the architectural requirements and hierarchy.

The summer holidays in between the project were a welcome break in the intensive process and offered the chance to reconsider several ideas of the programmatic proposal at P2. Simultaneously the break offered the chance to break away from the studio space and visit several projects as inspiration (most noteworthy were the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, Kings Cross station in London and a closer look at the station of Breda).

After P2 all of these topics, ideas and questions were used to start the design phase.

From the beginning the use of study models became a fundamental part of the process. Relatively quickly the concept of the Arcade as a mediator between the station requirements and the civic qualities of the Forum were developed (first through a diagram, soon after in the form of a foam massing model). These models were not necessarily used as representation of a particular expression, but used to study proportions of the space and offered a starting point to drawing plans and sections. These models (scale 1:1000) were simultaneously placed in the site model in order to make judgements on both the urban as the architectural scale. Series of models were produced to study the relationship between the arcade and the additional program that is attached to it (the blue foam in the image above), in order to test constraints in terms of its size, but by using varying materials, also to test notions as coherency and separations in a quick way.

Detailed studies were mostly started in plan and section, particularly to find a grid that was able to encompass the contradicting spatial requirements of the station, the civic, but also the more generic office programs. Nevertheless, the link between drawing and physical model remained important in order to efficiently communicate with tutors and fellow students. In later stages physical models were brought back to test in more detail.

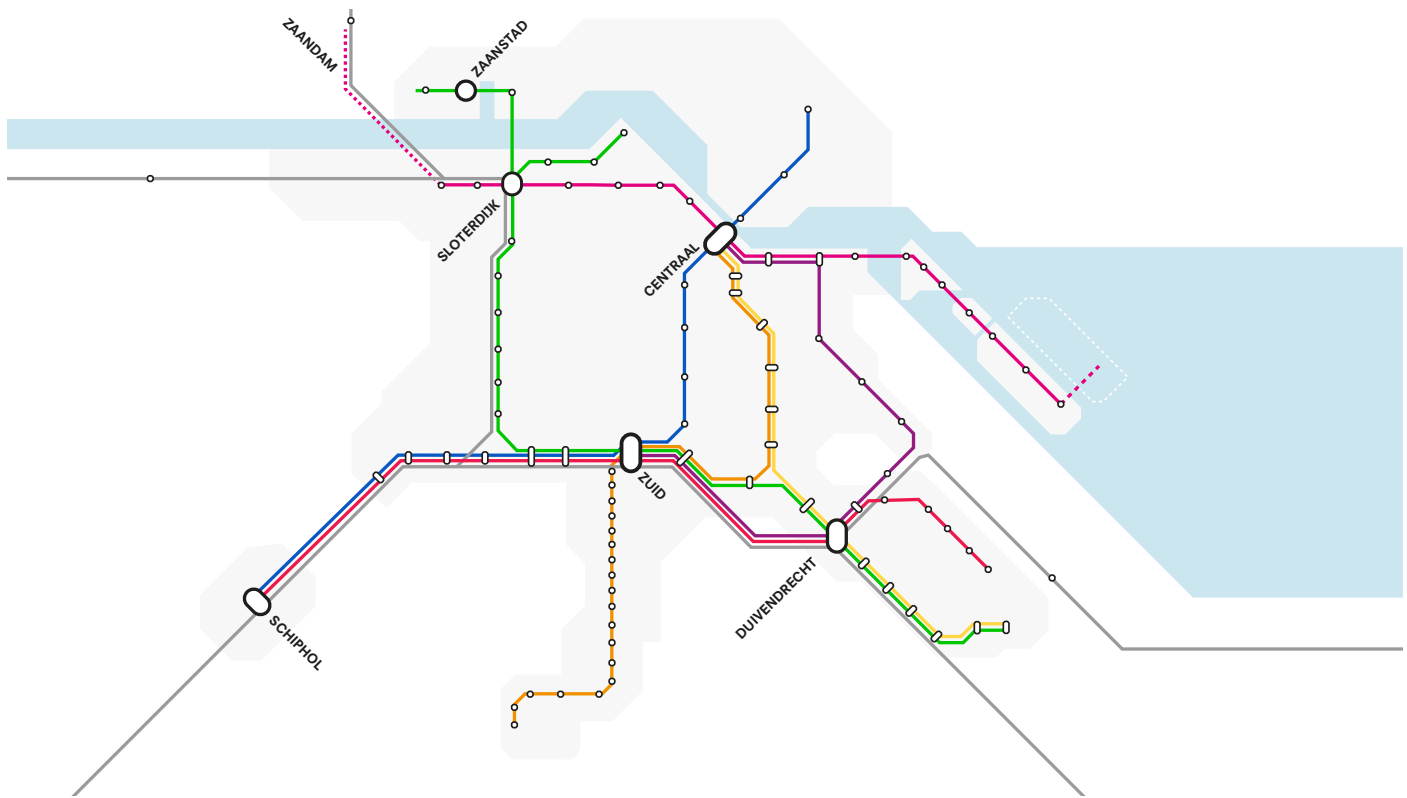


Image 0.03: Conceptual new metro and train map for the metropolitan area of Amsterdam.

Project topic + Studio topic

In the Syllabus, the chair of Complex Projects states the following: *"The ambition of the strategic project of studio and seminar is to develop new urban scenarios and investigate architectural typologies for the City of Amsterdam in a time horizon 2050"*

To do so, the Complex Projects studio has developed a very structured method of researching and developing the projects; nine students, nine projects all on the same 2.1x2.1km site (studied at 1:1000), all on a unique 700x700m "tile" with the ultimate goal of creating a coherent strategy for the area with all of the projects co-operating within a formulated group strategy.

However, for our group this proved difficult since we were asked to start at 1:10.000 and look at the metropolitan region of Amsterdam with the added intention of uniting previous strategies for disconnected areas in the city and a special interest in the mobility of the city. The process was similar for the most part and very valuable in terms of understanding the dynamics of a metropolitan region, except for the question of where to put the personal projects. As a group we decided it would be better to emphasise the potentials of the areas untouched by previous groups and placed our own sites in between the researched areas. Partly this was due to convenience, but for me personally it was the best opportunity to challenge the work of peers while simultaneously strengthening the relationship between the personal project and the group vision for the city as a whole.

The choice of the site of Duivendrecht Station is intrinsically connected to the group strategy. Our proposal focusses on relieving inner city areas of the heavy infrastructure created by the ring highway and the train networks. By focussing on three entrance stations that have great transit connections on the national and metropolitan scale (Sloterdijk, Zuid and Duivendrecht), Centraal Station could focus more on the metropolitan network of the metro and thus creating better conditions along the former train lines.

The project topic of combining a new civic typology with the existing typology of a transit station is thoroughly connected to the ambition of the chair, but also is an outcome of the way the studio is organised and run. By investigating potential scenarios (socially, economically, culturally, etc.) the personal fascinations as described on the previous page were given a platform and the opportunity to be developed further.

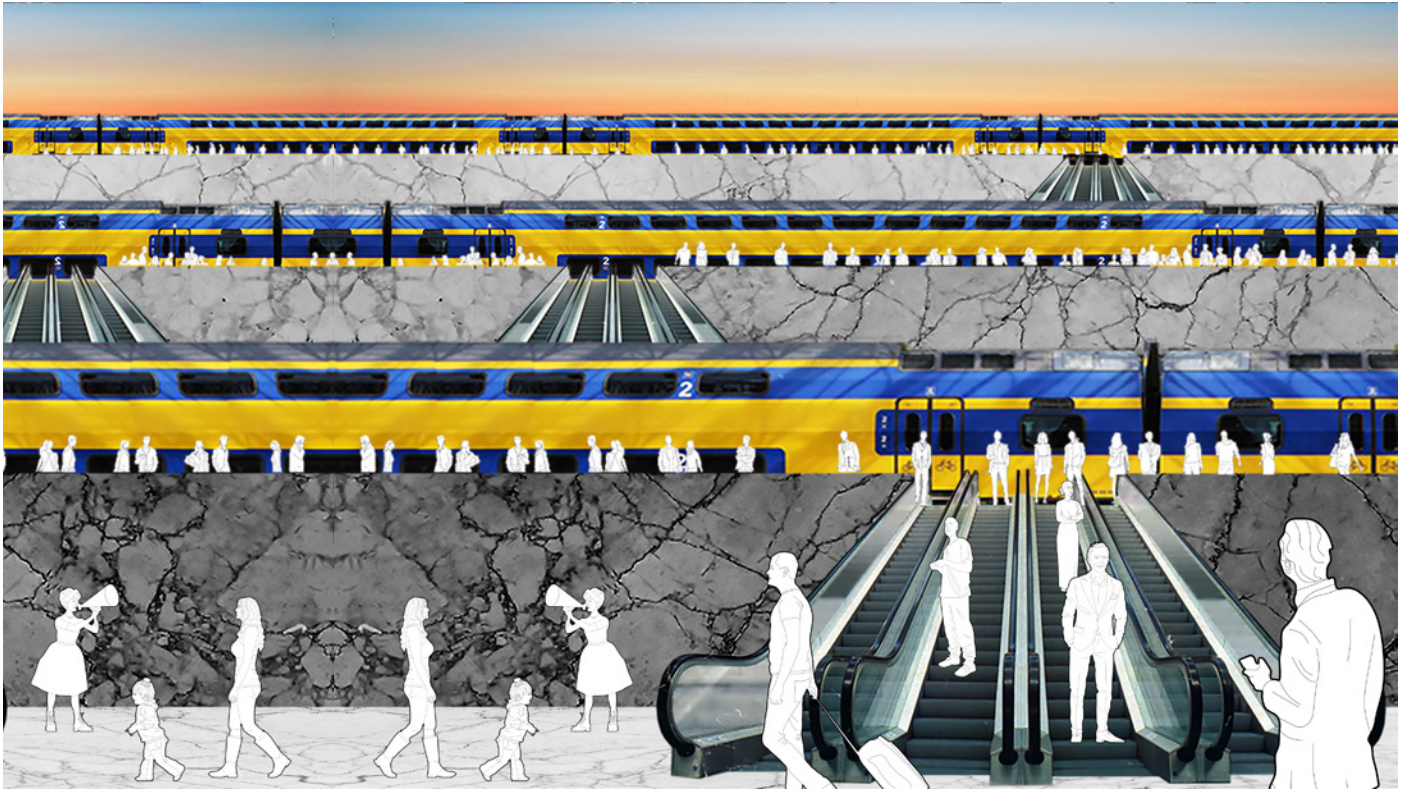


Image 0.04: Station as a space of mobility and a space of awe, explorative collage done between P1 and P2

Relevance

The role of the station in the urban context has been under pressure since urban growth has overtaken their former periphery locations. As stated before, the impact of the train tracks that penetrate current inner-city locations have negative effects on the communities that are separated from each other and, in some locations, has slowed down investment in new housing developments that could relieve the growing pressures of the current housing crisis. These trends are visible in many cities, not only in the Netherlands, but in many other cities in Europe. In Amsterdam the almost 'untouchable' dominance of Centraal Station is a large contributor to these undesirable conditions, since its central location requires trains to, both figuratively as literally, cut off the urban 'fingers', as devised in the Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan, creating a physical and mental division from the traditional city centre.

When Centraal station was constructed the promise of increased travel speed was welcomed into the city by a massive overhaul of the urban configuration by adding a new strip of land, cutting of the previous relation the centre had with the IJ; a sacrifice the promiss of progress demanded. The station was designed as a new entrance to the city, with grand architecture matching the Rijksmuseum, which was constructed during the same time (and even designed by the same architect). This heralded a new role for the station typology, moving it from the infrastructural to the urban. Later¹ this role changed with an increased focus on commercialisation.

Utrecht Hoog Catherijne is the prime example in the Netherlands, where the station fully merged with a shopping mall, but this development is still visible in the new revamp of the same station). This projects does credit the importance of these themes, but chooses not to make them guiding principles for its organisation and focusses on the civic role of the station once more.

A next question for the future role of the station are the new requirements of mobility in the metropolitan area of Amsterdam. Higher intensities, shorter transit times and a network of on demand networks, possible due to technological developments such as automated driving and more intelligent distributions of resources. For the station requirements, this mainly means that multimodality becomes increasingly more important and should focus on flows of people, connecting the different modes (the project looks at trains, metros, busses, on demand pods, kiss and ride, bicycles and rental bicycles and pedestrians). These different chains of transport converge the national, metropolitan, regional and the local into one site. This increased condensation brings the station in line with the role Amsterdam Centraal claimed as a gateway to the city. Simultaneously, shorter transit times mean that running for a connection could belong in the past; in an intensified network the next connection is never a long wait, which opens new opportunities for the station to evolve into something more than a space of infrastructural connection.

1.

This narrative neglects the reconstruction efforts that were necessary after WWII. However these stations have had an huge impact on multimodality, where for the first time station and local transport systems were aligned, as for example at Eindhoven, wehere the new bus station was built next to the reconstructed train station.

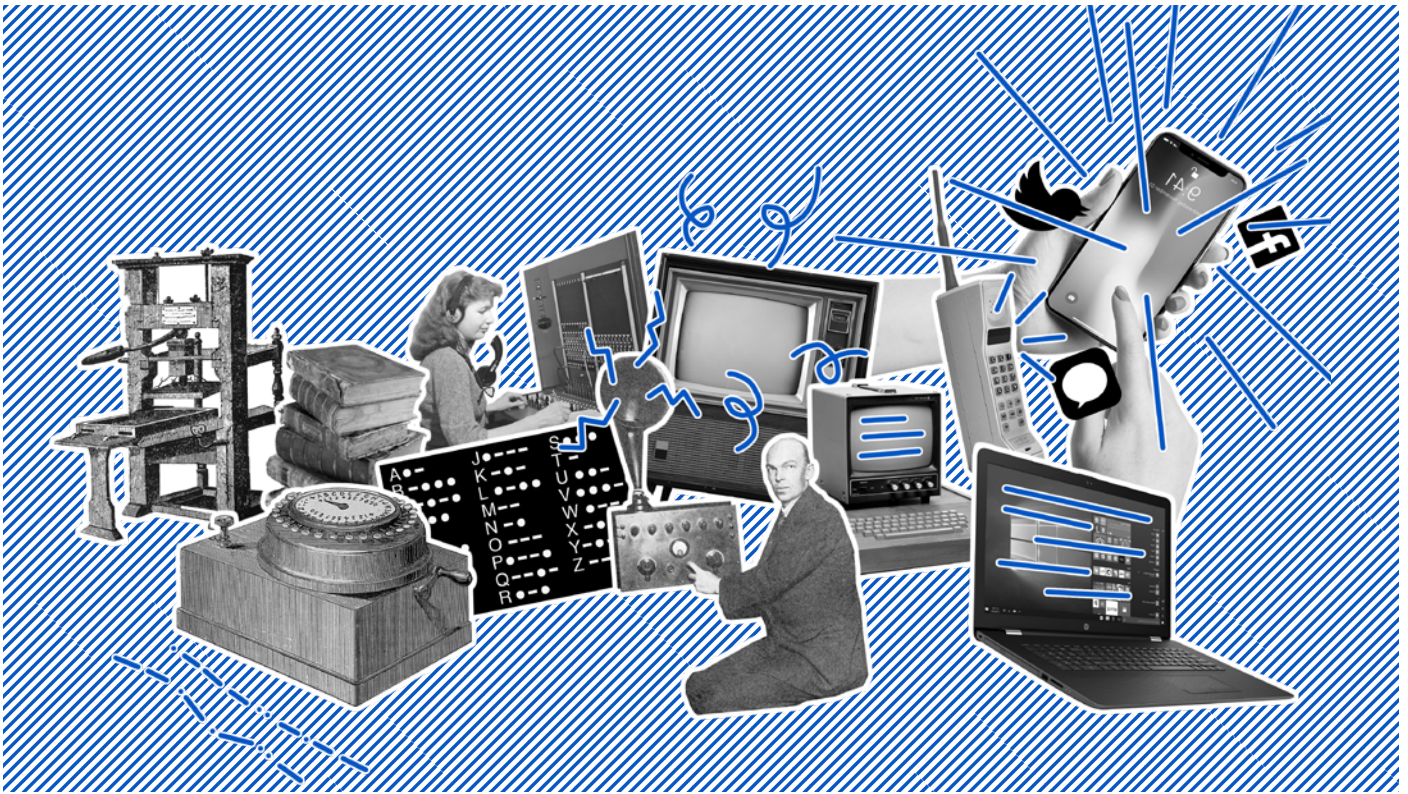


Image 0.05: Collage showing the rapid development of information technologies in the past 100 years.

Personal response to relevance

Ever since the Dutch gained universal voting rights in 1919, the way we participate in our politics (understood as an extension of everyday interactions between people) has hardly changed—even when everything we know has been altered drastically. In the same time frame, information technologies have evolved from paper-based media to its latest and most powerful form of ubiquitous information on our screens and constant data traffic. As individuals we reap the benefits of these developments, but as a society we are facing new risks. In an age where information equals power, the few now control the many. Companies like Google and Facebook have the potential to curate and manipulate our world view, while simultaneously the constant proximity to news and digital interaction is creating a new indifference unheard of in previous generations.

It is still too early to speculate on the full extent of the impact of these disruptions in our daily lives, but it is safe to say that the first cracks in the current systems are showing. Recent elections and the growing trend of treating the messiness of real life in a binary matter of right and wrong have already shocked the world. With social interaction moving into the abstract cloud, real-life interactions become increasingly valuable. It is therefore time to re-introduce the notion of offline participation into our daily lives—not by creating a new institution or destination that is dependent on admiration, but by morphing and blending its physical aspect into other parts of infrastructure space, thus becoming part of it itself.

Nevertheless the project is not claiming to know what is best; it's main focus is to create a space and a platform where real and meaningful interaction can take place and in which every voice has a rightful place. By uniting the users of the different programmatic functions of the station (from a local amenity to a national space of transit), the program creates many potential encounters, but does not rely on them to function as an urban piece of architecture or infrastructure.

The temporary condensation of scales brings a new relevance in the social spheres of Amsterdam as a metropole, just as much as it contributes to the local area. Within the context of the information transition, the project takes a stand as an optimistic and generous intervention that champions civic interaction, without expecting it to happen from scratch.