

Tessa Breen | Urbanism Thesis Report



Appreciating Assen

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Appreciating Assen

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Cluster
Beyond Growth

(Frontside image: Breen, 2025e)
(Backside image: Breen, 2025f)



Fig 1. De Brink, Assen.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how post-growth theory can be applied spatially, using the city of Assen as a case study. It responds to a perceived disconnection between growth objectives present in Dutch planning tradition, such as the latest Nota Ruimte, and the post-growth perspective that questions this continuous population and economic growth. The relevance of shifting towards post-growth spatial planning is supported by a discussion on the limits of growth. It addresses shifting demographic trends, changing social needs and disrupted ecological systems.

To discover how the spatial application of post-growth theory can foster an alternative future for the city of Assen, the Appreciative Inquiry method is applied. Through conversations, walks and historical analysis, local qualities of Assen have been discovered. Those that align with the set post-growth goals are embraced and are further built upon. A speculative travel guide of Assen in 2076 shows what embracing these post-growth qualities could lead to. The concrete design explorations work with what is there already, so that post-growth interventions suit with the character of the city. The travel guide allows readers to experience the post-growth city and imagine what living in it could be like. By doing so, this thesis aims to bridge the gap between post-growth theory and spatial practice, showing that collaborative action towards a post-growth future is both possible and desirable.

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01.

Introduction

what and why?

THE LIMITS TO GROWTH

Growth, at first, sounds like something we all want to achieve. However, already in 1972, Meadows et al. warned people in their publication entitled ‘The Limits to Growth’ about the dangers of the seeking constant exponential growth in population, industrial production and material consumption in a finite world. The report was commissioned by the Club of Rome, an influential group of scientists and economists, and was subsequently developed by an MIT research team (The Club of Rome, n.d.). They used an advanced world model that explored the consequences of uncontrolled exponential growth and came to the following conclusion:

“If the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years. The most probable result will be a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity.”

(Meadows et al., 1972, p. 23)

PARIS AGREEMENT

Over 40 years later, in 2015, world leaders acknowledged the risk of surpassing planetary boundaries and came to the well-known Paris Agreement. The agreement is aimed at limiting global warming and acknowledges that ever-growing emissions must be contained to avoid a climate catastrophe. Their goal is to keep “the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels,” preferably limiting it to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels (United Nations Climate Change, n.d.). In a way, the Paris Agreement is an attempt to change course like Meadows et al. had called for and, therefore, seemed promising.

Yet, in 2020, Jason Hickel’s book entitled ‘Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World’ echoes a similar call for change. This could indicate that the steps taken so far are not effective enough. Indeed, Hickel strongly criticises the effectiveness of the agreement and states, “Even if all the countries in the world fulfil their pledges – which are voluntary and non-binding, so there’s certainly no guarantee of this – global emissions will keep rising. We’ll still be hurtling towards 3.3°C of global warming by the end of the century” (2020, p. 129).

Hickel explains that modellers of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that informs the Paris Agreement) realized that continuing economic growth will unlikely result in the required emission reduction. Policymakers, however, believed that suggesting a trade-off between economic growth and climate change mitigation would be hard to sell to world leaders, risking the chance of not coming to an agreement at all (Hickel, 2020). Hence, technology had to come to the rescue and solve our issues. Bio-energy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS) seemed particularly promising, as it produced ‘negative emissions’ (Hickel, 2020, p. 131). Through relying on BECCS technology and incorporating it into the IPCC models, scenarios could be created that reduce emissions while simultaneously allowing the economy to continue to grow. According to Hickel, however, relying on this technology is a “crazy gamble,” as the BECCS technology is still highly experimental and has not been scaled up yet (2020, p. 131).

Acknowledging that we might not be able to rely too much on negative emissions technology, the IPCC shared a new report in 2018 that explains what it will take if we still want to meet the set goals of limiting global warming. They highlighted that we must reduce global greenhouse emission by 43% to limit warming to around 1.5°C and achieve net zero carbon dioxide emissions around 2050 (IPCC, 2022).

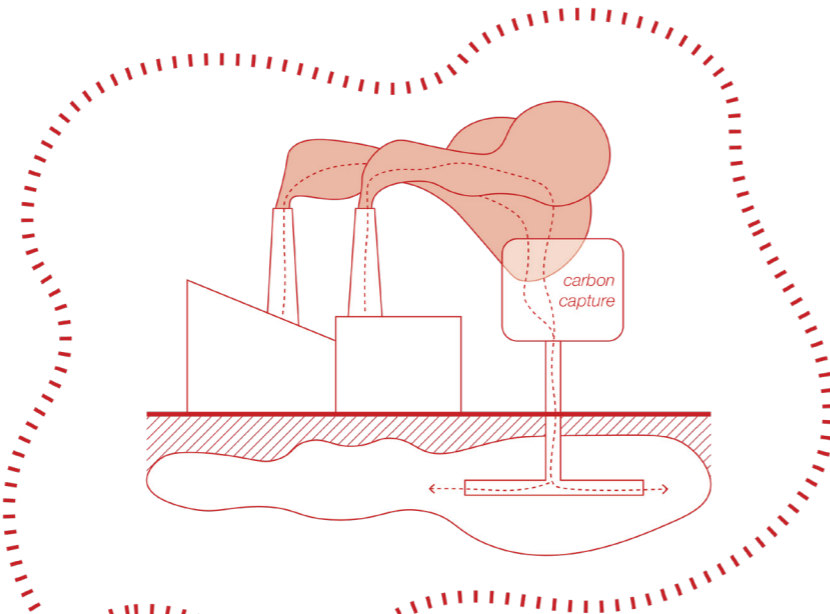
(GREEN) GROWTH

The focus on technological development like BECCS aligns with green growth thinking. Green growth aims to decouple economic growth from environmental impact through technological advancements. The past has, however, showed that increased efficiency due to technological advancements eventually still leads to increased consumption. This is referred to as the Jevons Paradox. Money savings due to efficiency gains are reinvested and growth continues (Hickel, 2020; Schenderling, 2022).

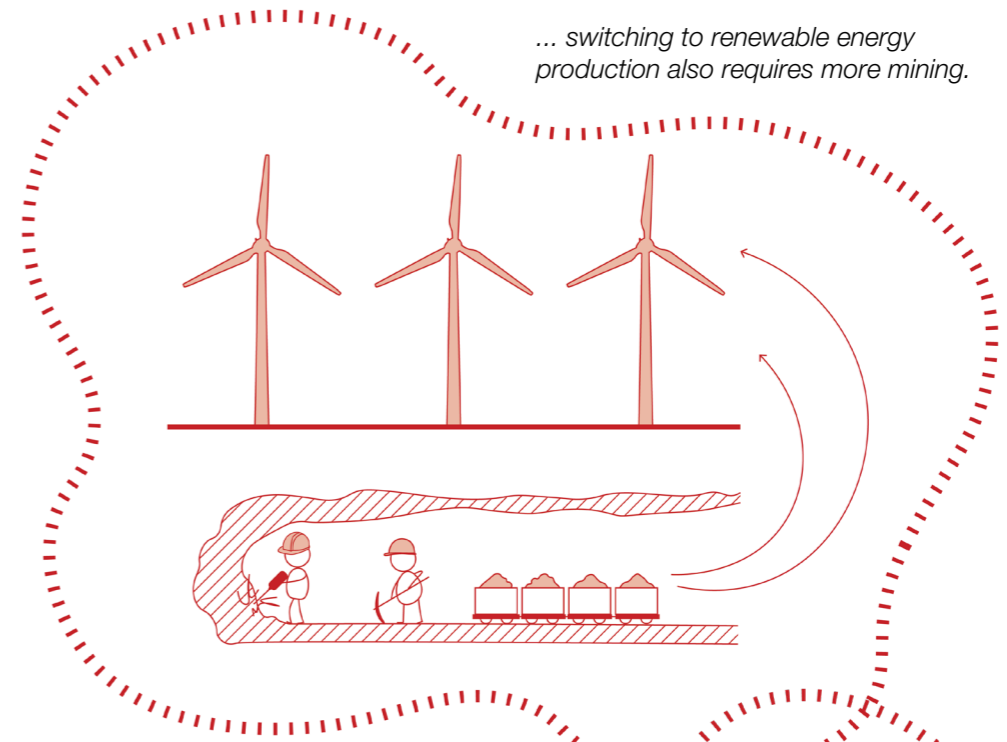
Green growth supporters also believe that clean energy is a way to continue economic expansion in a more sustainable manner. It is important to consider, however, that this new renewable energy technology actually requires the mining of more minerals and rare-earth minerals. In his book ‘There is life after growth: How we can realistically secure our future’ (in Dutch: ‘Er is leven na de groei: Hoe we onze toekomst realistisch veiligstellen’), Paul Schenderling mentions a study done by the International Energy Agency (IEA), stating that the energy transition will require 2000 to 4000 percent more rare-earth minerals in the next 20 years (2022, p. 47). This would require extensive exploitation of land. Still, the switch to renewable energy is key to reducing climatic impact. However, I believe it is already difficult to make the existing economy run on cleaner types of energy, let alone if this economy also keeps on growing. As Hickel puts it, “It’s as though we’ve chosen to fight this life-or-death battle facing uphill, blindfolded, with our hands tied behind our backs (2020, p. 140).

GREEN GROWTH?
Aims to decouple economic growth from environmental impact through technological advancements.

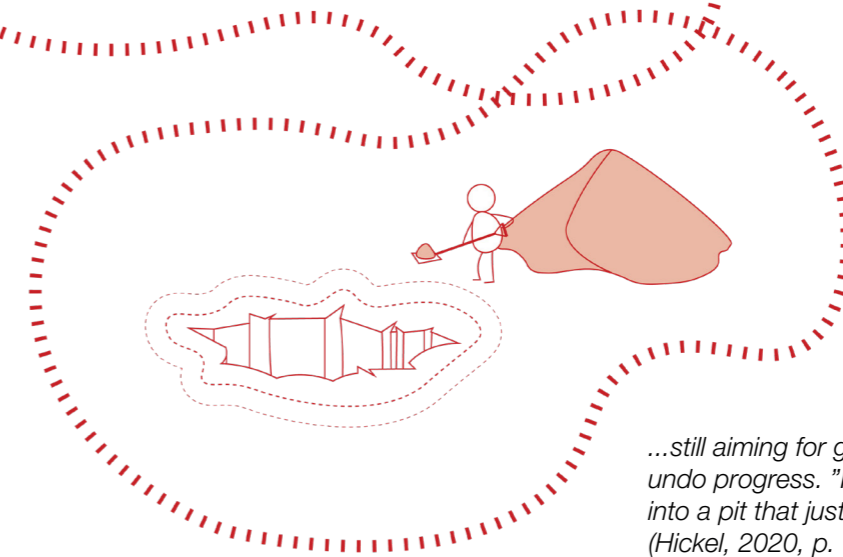
BUT...
... relies on highly experimental technology, such as BECCS (Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage) technology.



... Jevons Paradox: increased efficiency due to technological advancements resulting in increased consumption.



... switching to renewable energy production also requires more mining.



...still aiming for growth will continue to undo progress. "It's like shoveling sand into a pit that just keeps getting bigger" (Hickel, 2020, p. 140).

Fig 2. Why green growth is not enough (BoykoPictures, n.d.; Hickel, 2020; marina_ua, 2023; Singh, n.d.; Underground Landscape of Coal Mine Illustration, 2020; modified).

Table 1. Doubling time (how long it takes for the quantity to be doubled) for different growth rates (Meadows et al., 1972; modified).

Growth rate (% per year)	Doubling time (years)
0.1	700
0.5	140
1.0	70
2.0	35
3.0	23
4.0	18
5.0	14
7.0	10
10.0	7

GROWTH IMPERATIVE

The problem that keeps coming back when discussing deficient environmental action is society's obsession with continuous economic growth. It is important to note that growth in itself does not have to be negative. In nature, growth is normal. People, plants, and trees all grow. But they also reach a certain limit, an equilibrium state. This is not the case for the exponential economic growth that Meadows et al. warned about in 1972.

Over time, the economy has become a political instrument that guides governmental action (Mitchell, 2014). Growing the economy has become a goal on itself and is used to measure success. The desired perpetual exponential growth of capitalist economies is measured by the increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Defining progress by GDP growth has strong limitations as it does not differentiate between helpful or harmful production. The economists who developed the GDP metric, Simon Kuznets, also emphasised this flaw and called for accounting for social costs as well. Yet today progress is still largely defined by GDP growth, and most countries aim for a yearly GDP growth of 2 to 3%. Due to its exponential nature, a 3% growth would mean that the economy must double in size every twenty-three years (Hickel, 2020, p 19) (see Table 1 for the doubling time for other growth rates). This means that within a century, the economy must be twenty times bigger (Hickel, 2020).

Exponential GDP growth results in ever-growing emissions and ongoing appropriation and accumulation of land and resources, going way beyond planetary boundaries. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres puts it, "We are on a highway to climate hell with our foot still on the accelerator" (United Nations, 2022; BURA & Crimson Historians and Urbanists, 2024).

PARADIGM SHIFT

It seems impossible for our current economic system to continue to grow exponentially in a finite world. We could try to put all our time and energy into trying to decouple GDP growth and environmental impact, but this is slow and, given its reliance on experimental technology such as BECCS, a big gamble. The counterargument is that growth is needed to finance negative-emissions technology. The same growth needed for financing these technological advancements, however, increases the scale of the issue that these technologies have to solve. In the long run, therefore, it seems more sustainable to look at the source: find alternatives to the growth imperative. Post-growth thinkers propose a paradigm shift in which the focus lies on caring for each other and for nature. Wellbeing, equality, environmental stability, and system resilience then become guiding instead (Jensen, 2023).

Normalised indices of BWI (Better Well-being Index) and gross domestic product per captiy, 1820-2020

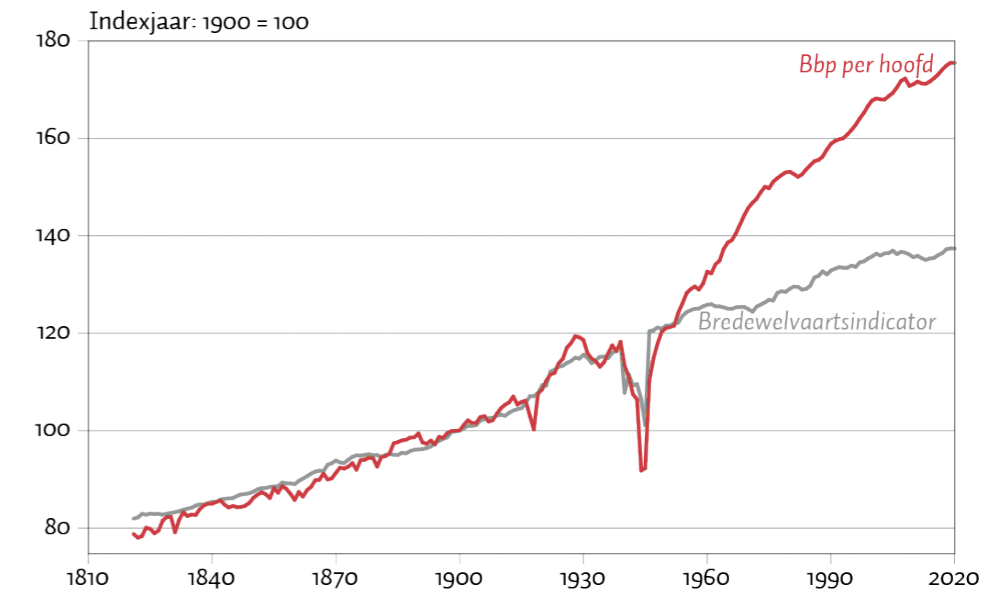


Fig 3. Gross domestic product per capita (Bbp per hoofd) against wellbeing (Bredewelvaartsindicator). It shows that growth in wellbeing has lagged behind economic growth since 1950 (Philips et al., 2021; modified).

ZOOMING IN ON THE NETHERLANDS

The proposed paradigm shift is seen as a global task. However, it is also believed that different countries have different responsibilities. Countries with higher capita per person, such as the Netherlands, have had higher ecological impact in the past and still do today (Hickel, 2020). There is still a distinct consumption gap between the global North and the global South. To reduce this gap, high-income countries must consume less, while low-income countries should still be able to grow economically to meet basic human needs. Therefore, I believe high-income countries must take the most responsibility in reducing their impact on the climate.

A common argument is that GDP growth is needed to achieve wellbeing. This is true for countries that don't meet basic human needs yet. A research-by-design report entitled 'Post Growth City' by BURA and Crimson Historians and Urbanists (2024) explains that this statement can be questioned for high-income countries like the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, after the Second World War, the increase in GDP per capita has started to outpace the increase in wellbeing, as shown in Figure 3 (Philips et al., 2021 mentioned in BURA & Crimson Historians and Urbanists, 2024). The economy is growing, but stress and depression problems are increasing and so is social inequality (BURA & Crimson Historians and Urbanists, 2024). This is why countries like the Netherlands become interesting when proposing a shift away from the growth imperative. There is excess GDP that does not necessarily lead to improved human welfare. Hence, a new system that focuses on a different kind of growth that actually does improve wellbeing might then become more interesting.

DUTCH PLANNING TRADITION

A growth and post-growth paradigm are also related to space. As Xue explains, “space is socially produced, being the product of economic, political and ideological forces” (2022, p. 410). At the same time, space also has the power to enable, shape, condition or oppose societal change (Xue, 2022). Hence, as an urbanism student, personal curiosity has sparked the question of what this growth imperative has meant spatially and, consequently, what an alternative approach could mean spatially? To start with the first question, it is relevant to investigate to what extent the growth imperative has been part of the Dutch spatial planning tradition. The timelines on the next pages (Figures 5 & 6) give a brief overview of the history of Dutch spatial planning.

A quick summary:

The Second World War was marked by destruction. After the war, there was a period of huge economic and population growth. The spatial Nota's (formal memorandum or policy document) from this period were centred around guiding this growth. They were focused on managing where all these people should live and where the economic activity should take place. The west of the country (the metropolitan conurbation known as the Randstad) was seen as the economic engine. Policy was aimed at facilitating growth here and also spreading it out across the country, while protecting some green arable land. Later, new towns were built to deconcentrate the population growth.

The oil crisis in 1971 and 1979 marked the end of the extreme economic growth (BURA & Crimson Historians and Urbanists, 2024). There is a brief period in which higher emphasis was laid on improving existing neighbourhoods and homes. There is a shift from focusing on quantity towards focusing on quality instead (BURA & Crimson Historians and Urbanists, 2024).

In response to the economic recession at the beginning of the 1980s, it was believed that the economy needed to be boosted again. Consequently, spatial planning became centred around improving the competitive position of the Netherlands within Europe and within the world. Focus shifted towards strengthening the regions that were already strong so that their competitive position could be strengthened further. Neoliberal thinking became more and more dominant, and companies owned by the government became privatised. Looking at the 2001 Nota, it can be observed that the national government became less involved with the planning of the daily living environment and responsibility was placed on local governments and citizens. Spatial planning became more and more market driven.

The financial crisis of 2008, however, highlighted the vulnerabilities that occur when market and spatial planning are highly intertwined. Additionally, there was an increasing desire for more governmental direction to address the wicked spatial problems that the market had been unable to solve. The large tasks regarding climate adaptation, the energy transition, and the building of housing and infrastructure required a clear vision and strong decisions. This is where we are at now. National government is retaking some control over spatial planning through its most recent Nota Ruimte.



Fig 4. Third Spatial Nota (Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, n.d.-a; modified).

Throughout time, it can be observed how spatial planning is highly influenced by economic events and largely driven by the pursuit of economic growth. The questions spatial planners asked themselves were centred around where growth should take place (central or decentral) and who should decide this (also central or decentral). The neoliberal planning is still in effect today and has led to spatial development that is centred around financial profit instead of qualitative living. The growth thinking and its interwovenness into spatial planning have resulted in large claims on space, raw materials and energy (BURA & Crimson Historians and Urbanists, 2024). Considering the urgency of a paradigm shift as explained earlier, it might be time to rethink this attitude and ask ourselves whether we can take spatial measures that are no longer centred around the constant need to grow economically.

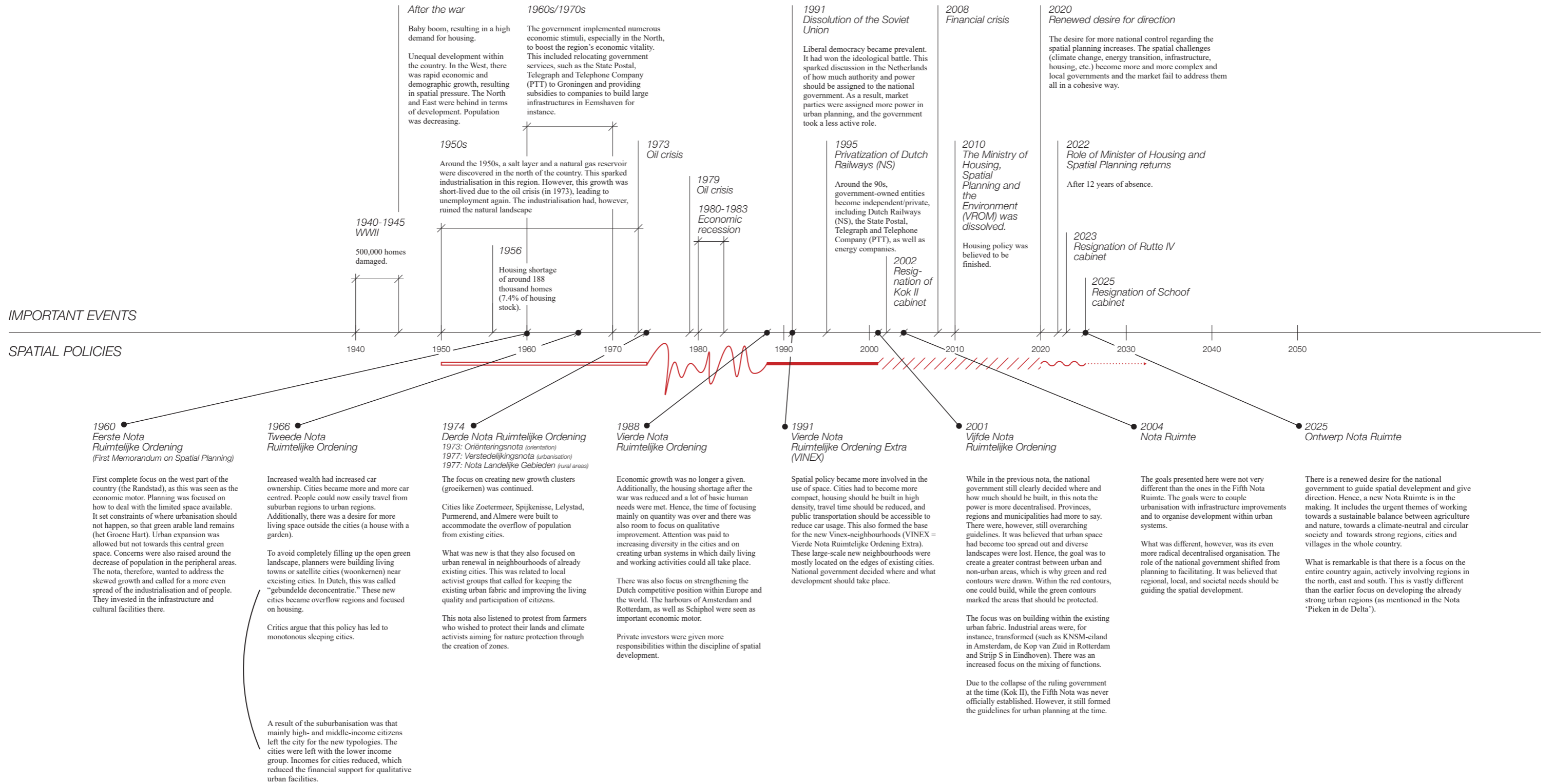


Fig 5. Timeline with overview of Dutch spatial planning (Bruinsma & Koomen, 2025; CBS, 2025c; Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025b; Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025c; Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025d; Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025e).

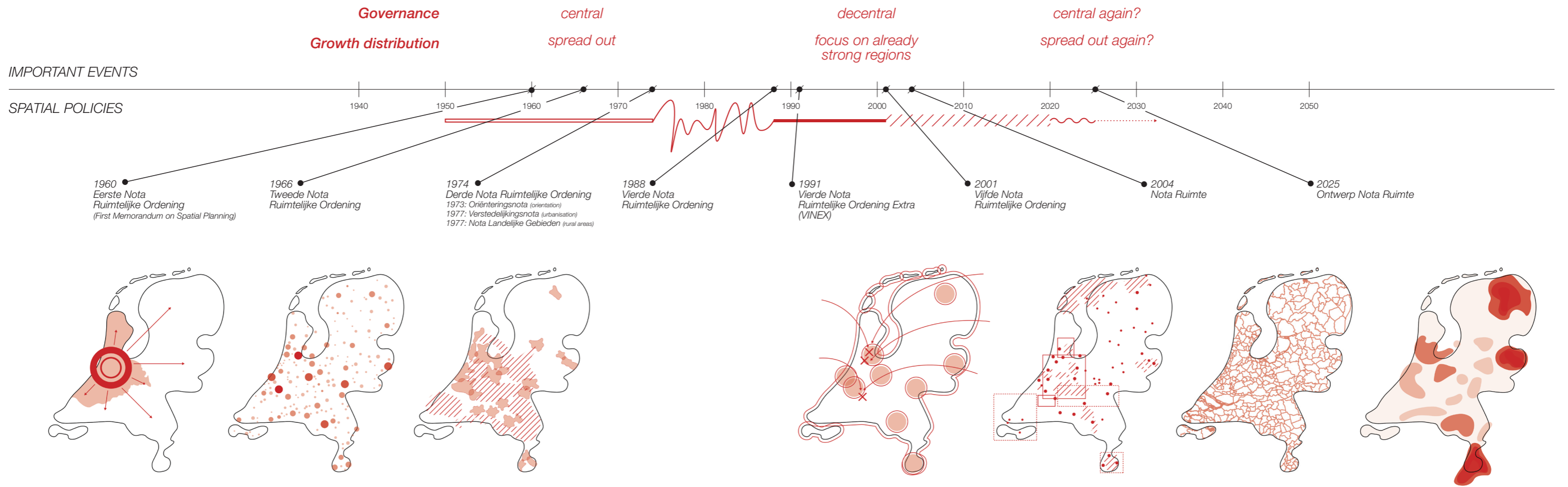


Fig 6. Summarised imeline with overview of Dutch spatial planning (Bruinsma & Koomen, 2025; CBS, 2025c; Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025b; Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025c; Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025d; Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025e; Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving, 2023).

The first three Nota's were focused on addressing post-war reconstruction and modernisation. They aimed to manage the rapid economic and population growth. The Nota's were also focused on addressing the skewed growth by trying to spread out growth across the country. The national government had a strong role and provided the guiding rules.

Period of economic crisis and recession.

There is a higher emphasis on improving existing neighbourhoods and homes. More attention is being paid to improving quality as opposed to only increasing quantity.

The focus has shifted towards transforming existing cities. First by adding neighbourhoods on the edges and then by only building within set urban contours. Instead of spreading out growth evenly across the country, policy is now geared towards strengthening the already strong regions. The role of the national government is reduced and market is given more freedom. Decentralised power is taking off.

Period of decentralisation of urban planning. The national government let local governments, citizens and companies decide what should go where. Hence, the spatial planning in the Netherlands was mostly market-driven. National government was mainly concerned with the international competitive position and with national infrastructural systems.

National government retaking some control over the urban planning in the country due to complex spatial challenges that the market addresses insufficiently.

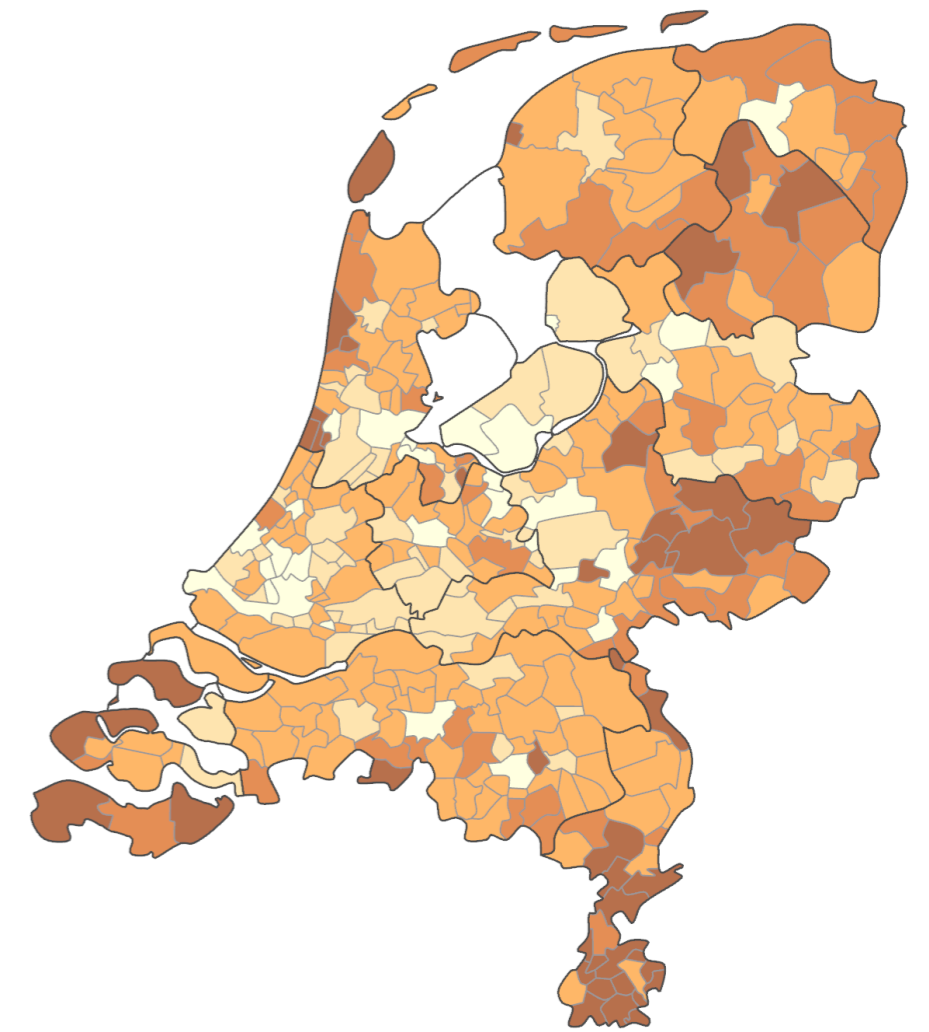
Focusing again on growth in the entire country, actively involving the north, east and south of the Netherlands.

OTHER TRENDS IN SUPPORT OF A PARADIGM SHIFT

‘The Limits to Growth’ warns for both unchecked economic and population growth (Meadows et al., 1972). The previous timeline shows that besides economic growth, the history of Dutch spatial planning has also been largely shaped by population growth, especially after the baby boom. All these people had to have a place to live. Still today, the Netherlands is dealing with a housing shortage of 400.000 homes (Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, n.d.-b). This can lead to the quick conclusion that we must build more homes at a rapid pace. However, looking more carefully at the problem, it can be observed that the Dutch housing market has a high rate of under-occupancy. 61 percent of the citizens live in a house that is under-occupied (Eurostat, 2024 in de Volkskrant, 2024). This suggests that the housing shortage is chiefly a distribution problem. Another study done by Springco Urban Analytics states that theoretically there is enough space for 3 million more inhabitants if the housing space was used more efficiently (Team Stadszaken.nl, 2020). Making better use of the existing stock and creating different types of homes seems to be a more sustainable option than simply building more houses for four-person households, especially since the household size is expected to continue to decrease (Stoeldraijer et al., 2024). This aligns with the proposed paradigm shift moving away from growth in the sense of spatial expansion and towards spatial improvement.

The current population growth is also different from what it used to be in the past. Studies have shown that the population growth is now solely driven by migration. Without it, the Dutch population would decline (De Valk & Van Dalen, 2024). The expected population growth due to migration is difficult to predict. Knowing that the anti-immigration sentiment has grown significantly in the Netherlands, it should be considered that more strict regulations would lead to reduced population growth.

Furthermore, the Dutch population is strongly ageing, as the baby boomers from after the war have now reached the retirement age. According to CBS, the percentage of people aged 65 or older has increased from 12.8% in 1990 to 20.8% in 2025 (CBS, 2025b). Figure 7 also shows that the percentage of elderly people is highest in municipalities in the east of the country. The ageing population is intensified here by young people moving away for work or education (CBS, 2025b). The graying population results in an increase in the dependency ratio, referring to “the ratio between the number of people aged 65 or over and the number of people aged 20 to 65” (CBS, n.d.). In 2050, this dependency ratio or ‘grey pressure’ is expected to increase to 50% (1 elderly person reliant on 2 people of working age), putting extreme pressure on social services, such as pensions and elderly care (CBS, 2025b). Without immigration, this ageing population leads to a shrinking labour force, which could slow down economic growth. Hence, the demographic trends pose limits to a system that relies on perpetual growth.



Percentage
 11-18
 18-21
 21-25
 25-27
 28-35

Fig 7. Percentage of elderly (65 years or older) per municipality (VZinfo, 2025; modified).

NOTA RUIMTE 2025

Given the latest trends, it is interesting to see whether they are reflected in the most recent Nota Ruimte (Spatial Planning Memorandum). As mentioned earlier, the national government is re-taking some control again in the field of spatial planning. This has translated into the Ontwerp Nota Ruimte of 2025 in which a more concrete (draft) vision for the country has been drawn up. An important aspect of this new Nota Ruimte is the VISTA-strategy (see Figure 8), which includes five different spatial development approaches, namely: Versterken (Strengthen), Initiëren (Initiate), Stimuleren, (Stimulate), Transformeren (Transform) and Accomoderen (Accommodate) (Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025a). These different strategies are applied to different regions within the country. What stands out is that the regions that are assigned the “Initiate” approach, which are Groningen-Assen, Twente, and Zuid-Limburg, are all located in the east. It shows that the national spatial planning is focusing again on spreading out growth across the country. When explaining what initiating would mean in these regions, the ministry states that they want to initiate an increase in scale with “distinctive spatial-economic development” (Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025a, p. 190). They wish to make these regions grow through investing in housing and economic activity, which aligns with the Dutch national planning tradition of centring spatial development around economic and population growth. However, given all the reasons mentioned earlier to think about a possible paradigm shift, I question the growth approach for these regions and wonder if an alternative route is better suited.

Original legend of VISTA-map (in Dutch):

Op deze kaart staat een indeling van regio's met een lokaal passende strategie: Versterken, Initiëren, Stimuleren, Transformeren of Accommoderen.

Regionaal gedifferentieerde strategie voor ruimtelijk-economische ontwikkeling

- Versterken
- Initiëren
- Stimuleren
- Transformeren
- Accommoderen

Opbouw van de dagelijkse stedelijke systemen

- (Indicatief):
- Metropool
 - Centrumstad
 - Regio kern
 - Lokale kern

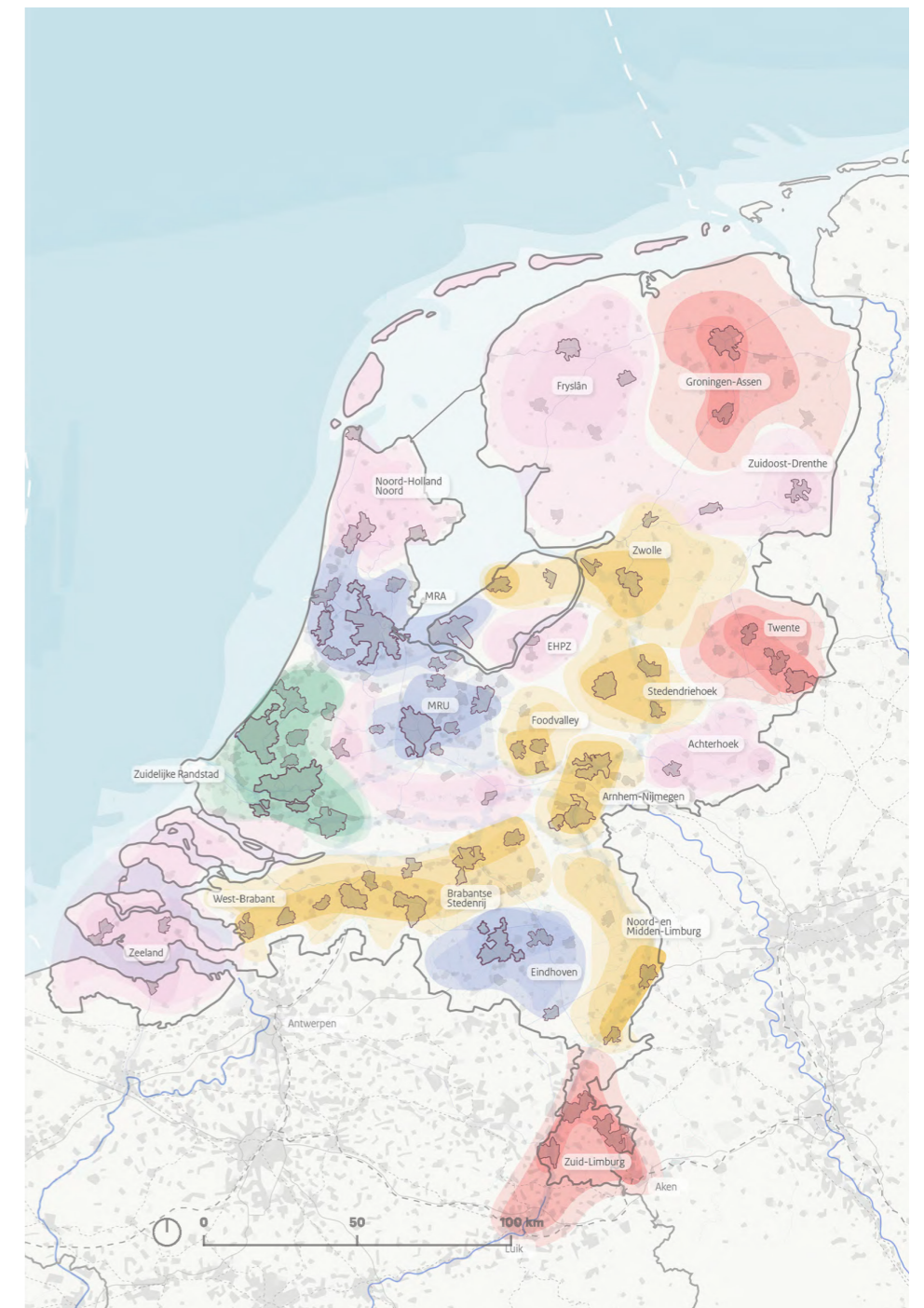


Fig 8. VISTA-map as part of the Ontwerp Nota Ruimte (Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025a; modified).

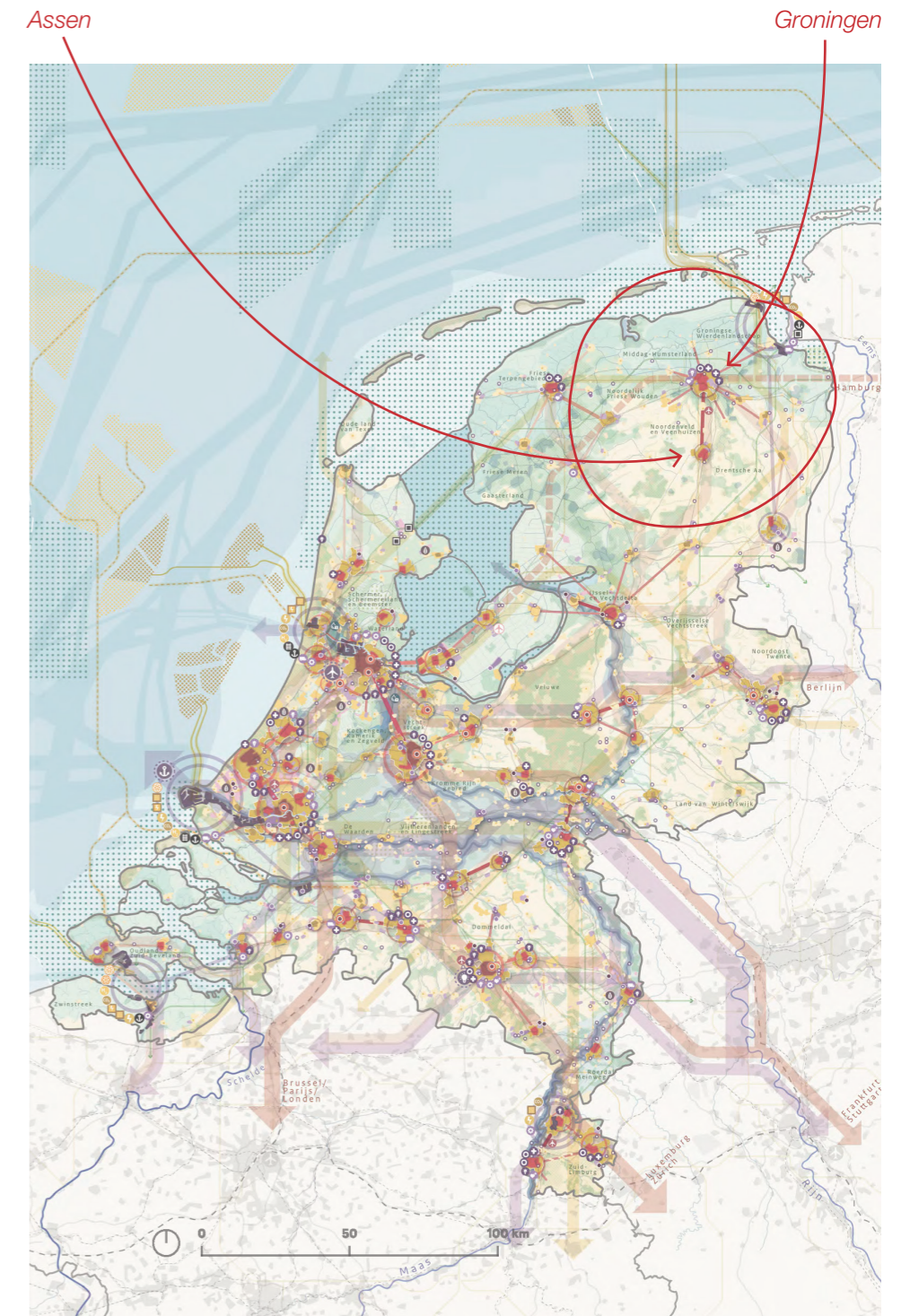
WHY ASSEN?

Looking at the “Initiate”-regions on this Vision Map 2050 from the same Ontwerp Nota Ruimte (see Figure 9), something interesting can be observed in the Groningen-Assen region. The city of Groningen is surrounded by lots of icons, indicating that there is extensive programming in this city that could facilitate the proposed growth. A thick red line connects Groningen to the smaller city underneath it. This is Assen. Here, the icons are lacking. It makes one wonder how growth will be initiated in Assen and what this would mean for the city.

Original legend of Vision Map 2050
(in Dutch, shortened):

- (Inter)nationale corridors en knooppunten voor personenvervoer
- Stedelijk netwerk Nederland
- (Inter)nationale spoor- en wegcorridors
- Potentiële corridor
- Luchthavens
- Internationale stations (HSL + IC)
- Woon-Werkomgevingen en regionale verbindingen**
- Woon-werkmilieus, van metropolaan tot luv
- Regionale verbindingen en samenhang
- Voorzieningen en instellingen met regionale uitstraling**
- Campus
- Universiteit
- Ziekenhuis
- Economie**
- Sleutelsector op basis van toegevoegde waarde (regionaal ecosysteem)
- Mainports (haven, luchthaven, brainport)
- Multimodaal bedrijventerrein
- Bedrijventerrein met hoge milieubelasting en > 200 hectare
- Bedrijventerrein
- Hyperscale datacenter
- Bestaand glastuinbouwcluster
- Greenport

Fig 9. Vision Map 2050 as part of the
Ontwerp Nota Ruimte (Ministerie van
Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening,
2025a; modified).



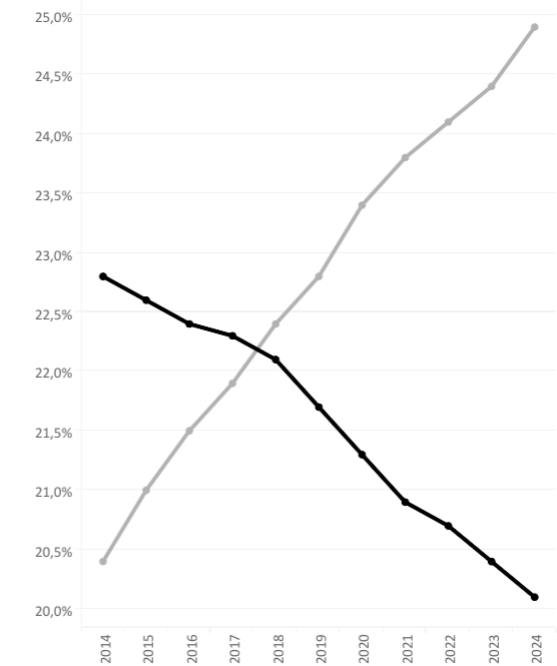
Assen is a medium-sized city consisting of around 70,700 inhabitants (CBS, 2026). Even though Assen is not the largest city of the province, it is the capital city of Drenthe. The city has high ambitions in terms of growth. The Economic Agenda 2026-2030 for Assen indicates that the city wants to contribute to national, regional and local challenges and wishes to create 5,000 extra jobs and build 10,000 homes (Gemeente Assen, 2025). For context, in 2024, Assen had 33,215 homes and 43,970 jobs (BAG/ABF, 2025; LISA, 2024).

The Municipality of Assen also states, however, that labour market, housing, space and energy shortages pose challenges to the proposed economic growth. The biggest challenge for the economy of Assen is the labour market shortage. This is due to a changing composition of the population (see Figure 10). In the last 5 years, the percentage of people younger than 20 years old has decreased from 39.4% to 36.9%, while the percentage of people older than 65 years old has increased from 35.5% to 38.7% (Gemeente Assen, 2025). Hence, the number of people available for occupation is shrinking. Figure 11 shows that the largest percentage of the people working are above 45 years old, with a peak in the category of 50 to 59 years old (Gemeente Assen, 2025). Knowing this, it is expected that in the coming 10 to 15 years a lot of citizens will reach retirement age and leave the labour market. Combined with an increasing number of young people leaving Assen, this leads to an expected increase in labour shortages. Furthermore, the Economic Agenda of Assen predicts that the population in Assen will shrink after the year 2035 if no active measures are undertaken to attract people. It seems like Assen wants to mitigate this future and is, therefore, actively advocating for economic and population growth. The fact that they are assigned to be an “Initiate”-region by the national government can, therefore, sound very promising to the city.

The key economic sectors in Assen are healthcare, energy, (national) government services and leisure (Gemeente Assen, 2025). The government services are mostly related to national defense and safety for which the Safety Campus Assen hub is being developed (Ondernemend Assen et al., 2025). The number of jobs in all of the sectors has grown, except for the energy sector. This can be explained by the stop on gas extraction and the phasing out of NAM (Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij) activities. Additionally, the industrial, building, and ICT sector seem to stay behind in terms of growth (Gemeente Assen, 2025). To achieve a healthy mix, the municipality wants to increase economic activity in those sectors.

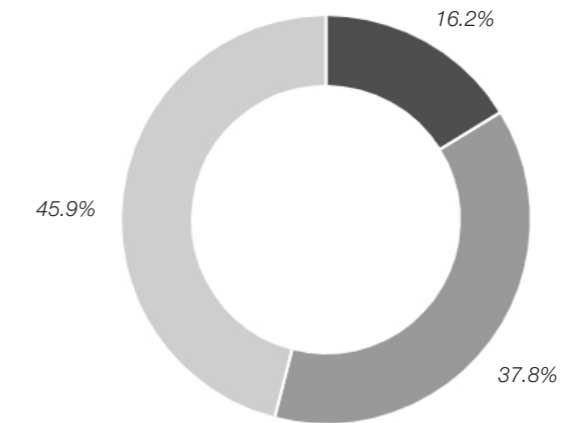
Percentage of young people and elderly in Drenthe:
 — Percentage people between 0 to 19 years old
 — Percentage people 65 years and older

Fig 10. The proportion of young people is decreasing, while the proportion of elderly is increasing in Drenthe (Trendbureau Drenthe, 2025).



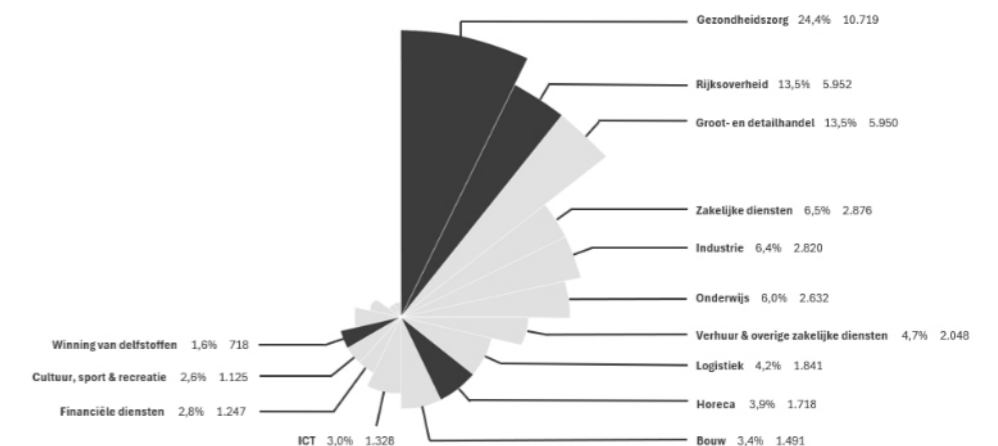
Percentage population of working age:
 ■ 15-24 years old
 ■ 25-44 years old
 ■ 45-74 years old

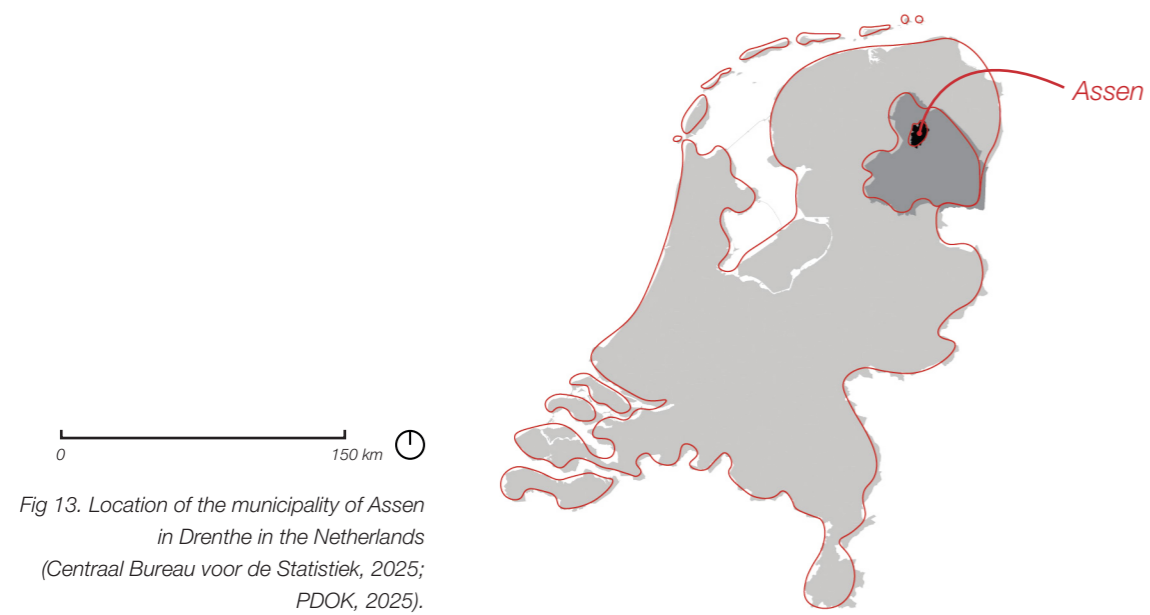
Fig 11. The working population by age group in the municipality of Assen in 2023: 15-24 years old (16.2%), 25-44 years old (37.8%), and 45-74 years old (45.9%) (CBS mentioned in Gemeente Assen, 2025; modified).



■ Highlighted sectors (clockwise): health, government, hospitality, mineral extraction
 ■ Other sectors

Fig 12. Number of jobs and their percentage share of total employment, per sector (LISA mentioned in Gemeente Assen, 2025; modified)





Another limit to the desired growth of Assen is its natural green character (see Figure 14). In 2023, Assen was given the title of the Greenest City of the Netherlands (Ondernemend Assen et al., 2025). 60 percent of the municipality is categorised as green area and multiple Natura 2000 areas surround the city (Faber et al., n.d.). In the north and east is the vast Drentsche Aa national park is situated and, in the southwest, lies the Witterveld natural area. Even further to the west lies Fochteloërveen, another nature reserve and Natura 2000 area. Within the city, a large forest named the Asserbos is situated. If Assen wants to maintain this green character, it must critically think about the amount, type and location of the houses being built.

All in all, the situation in Assen shows a tension between the desire to grow and a variety of different limits that could challenge this growth, including an ageing population, a shortage of people of employment age, and uncertain economic prospects (Gemeente Assen, 2025). Furthermore, it is surrounded by natural landscapes with valuable ecosystems that should be protected. I question whether these tensions will be properly addressed if spatial development continues to be reliant on economic and population growth. Hence, it is hypothesized that Assen needs to think about an alternative approach. The city, therefore, becomes an interesting case to test the proposed paradigm shift.



PROBLEM STATEMENT

Considering the latest Nota Ruimte, there seems to be a disconnection between the Dutch planning strategy and the desired change proposed by Meadows et al., Hickel, Schenderling, and many other post-growth thinkers. This fascinates me. Given that there are clear limits to the current economic growth-obsessed system, the proposed shift by alternative growth proponents towards a system that is no longer reliant on economic growth seems a more sustainable and very logical approach. Besides, even if one doesn't believe in the limits of growth raised by Meadows et al. (1972), current demographic trends seem to suggest that growth is no longer self-evident in the Global North, including in the Netherlands and especially in the eastern part of the country.

To many, it seems too far-fetched to truly envision a future that is no longer driven by economic and population growth. Today's local urgencies often overshadow global long-term intergenerational thinking. Additionally, the growth imperative is deeply rooted in our everyday lives. Hence, alternatives are seen as idealistic and not realistic. Therefore, technological solutions are still seen as the way forward. Consequently, necessary structural change keeps being postponed and the desire to economically grow remains an important part of Dutch spatial planning. This is proven by the assigned "Initiate"-regions in the latest Nota Ruimte, which strongly focus on economic and population growth.

While growth-based lifestyles have been marketed and normalised for generations, it is hypothesised that post-growth lifestyles still lack powerful imagery and narratives. In order to legitimise systemic change and make alternatives to conventional growth not only necessary but also socially desirable, I believe that it is important to make concrete what the spatial consequences of such alternative growth measures would be. Spatialization is deemed necessary "given that space is a structural entity that has efficacious causal powers shaping, mediating and conditioning societal change" (Xue, 2022, p. 418). Hence, as a student within the field of urbanism, I am motivated to investigate and visualise how post-growth theory can be applied in urban spaces and how this would transform daily lives.

Although there are some bottom-up pilot projects, there is still a lack of systematic spatial application of post-growth theory. Additionally, as Karl Krämer (2022) observes, current literature on degrowth and space often lacks a reflection on positionality. This observation can be extended to post-growth literature as well. Hence, to convince people that living in a city shaped by alternative growth ideals could be realistic, the proposal must be situated and applied to the context of a specific city. This thesis will, therefore, zoom in on an interesting city in one of the assigned "Initiate"-regions: Assen.

A what-if scenario will be created to imagine an alternative post-growth future for the city of Assen. A travel guide that is situated in Assen in the year 2076 will assume that the city has become an example of a post-growth city. This format will show people what it could concretely mean to live in Assen if the city makes decisions with post-growth end-goals in mind. It can help convince the reader that a post-growth Assen is not only possible but also desirable. This type of imagining can then spark inspiration and initiate collaborative action towards the desired post-growth future.



Fig 15. Drentsche Aa National Park
(Breen, 2025a; modified).



Fig 16. Pittelo neighborhood in Assen,
planned in 1964 to facilitate growth
(Breen, 2025g; modified).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Through using Assen as a testbed for the proposed paradigm shift, this thesis aims to question the growth-oriented spatial planning tradition and proposes an alternative instead. It aims to investigate what it would mean spatially if economic growth were no longer the main driver for spatial development. This translates into the following main research question:

How can the spatial application of post-growth theory foster an alternative sustainable future for the city of Assen?

To answer the overarching research questions, the following sub-research questions are composed:

- Q1** What is the relationship between the spatial development of Assen and the growth imperative, and what has been the role of the spatial policies and *Nota's*?
- Q2** What are key post-growth principles and how can they be applied spatially?
- Q3** What is the local view on the spatial development in Assen and to what extent does this view align with growth-oriented thinking?
- Q4** What post-growth opportunities and barriers currently exist in Assen?
- Q5** What would it mean for local life if Assen becomes a post-growth city?
- Q6** What role can visioning play in enabling a shift towards spatial development that is not driven by conventional growth?

Figure 17 shows how the context-specific alternative post-growth future for Assen can help with the imagining of alternatives to the current growth paradigm. This imagining can then become the driver for the needed change.

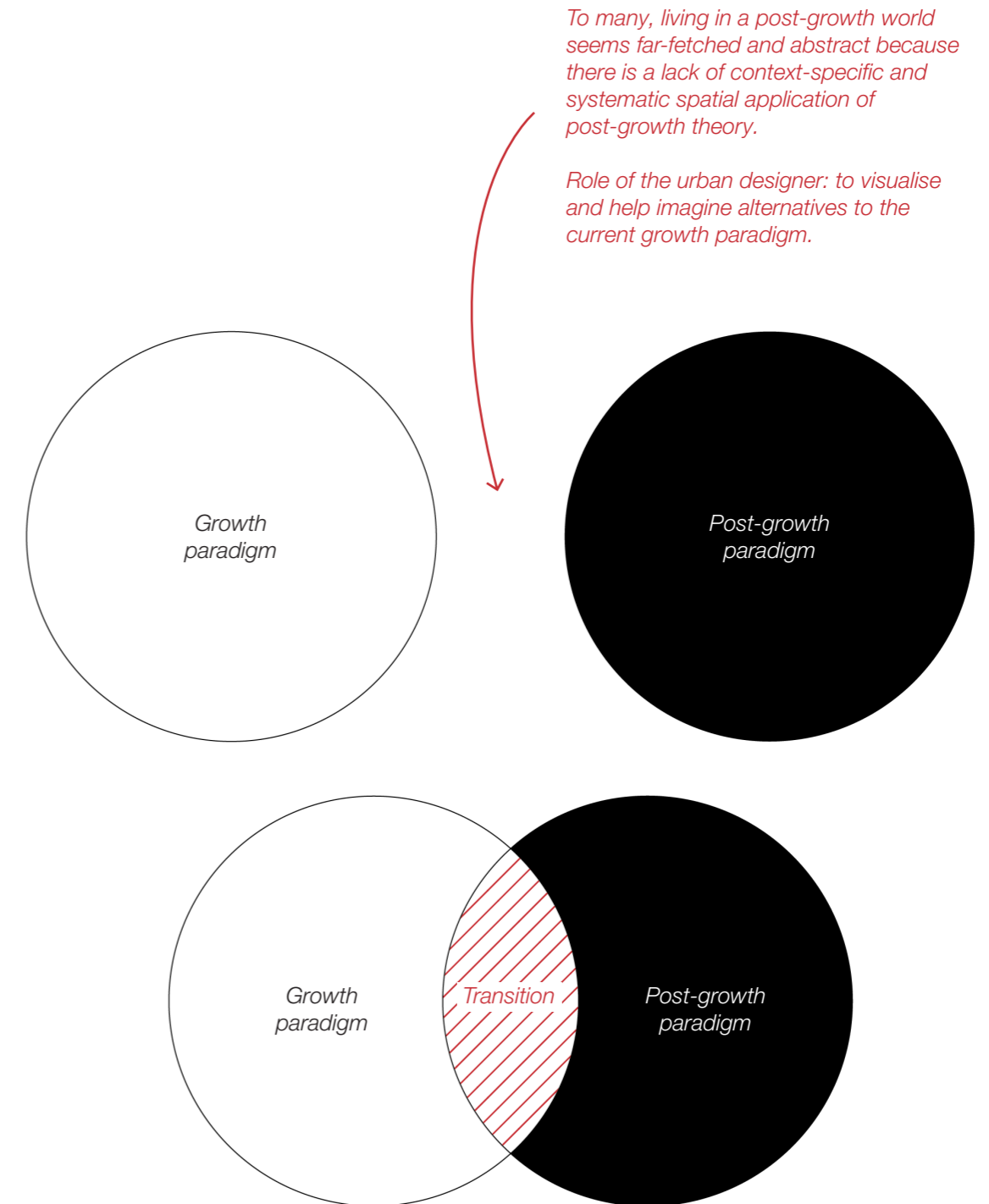


Fig 17. Aim of research question.

02.

Approach

how?

THEORETICAL + CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Throughout this report so far, different terms have been used to describe alternatives to conventional growth. It's important to understand their difference. According to a paper by the Forum for a New Economy, the growth debate can be divided into three main streams: green/inclusive growth, post-growth and degrowth (Likaj et al., 2022 mentioned in Widuto et al., 2023):

Green/inclusive growth

For proponents of green and inclusive growth, growth is still the overarching goal. To them, arguing against growth is politically unrealistic. After all, it is too embedded in society's understanding of what economic success means (Likaj et al., 2022). They do, however, believe that adjustments are needed to make it more sustainable and inclusive (Widuto et al., 2023). According to Likaj et al. (2022), green/inclusive growth policy focuses on "changing the composition and form of economic output and consumption, so as better to reduce environmental impact and achieve social goods, while continuing to seek GDP growth" (p. 23).

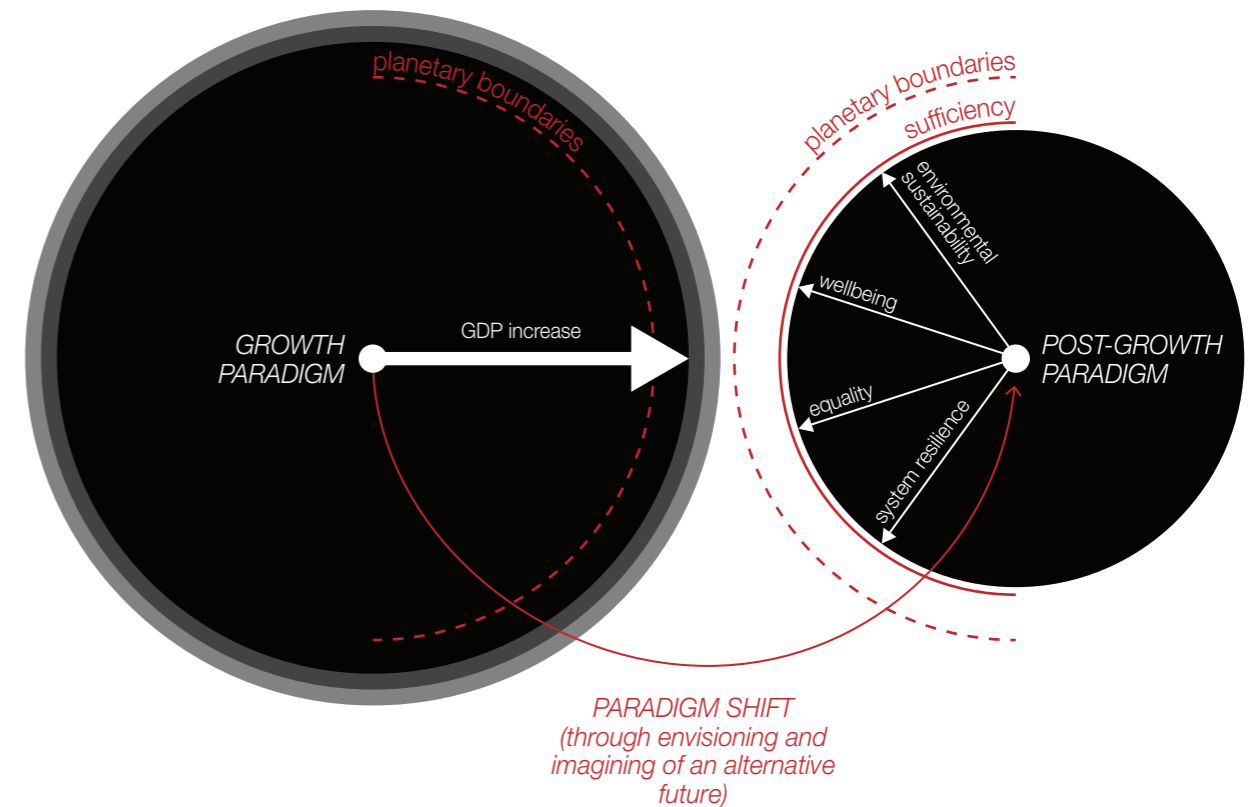
Degrowth

The vision of degrowth thinkers is drastically different from that of green growth proponents. They believe the solutions proposed by the green growth community are not sustainable in the long run "due to limited regenerative capacities of the ecosystem and planetary boundaries" (Jensen, 2023, p. 4). Degrowth thinkers believe that growth just for the sake of growth is unsustainable. According to them, the current economic system relies on social exploitation and leads to inequalities (Jensen, 2023). Instead, a steady-state economy should be attained in which consumption and production is in balance with the capacities of natural ecosystems. This requires the abandonment of capitalist thinking and going against the desire to continuously grow GDP. According to Kallis et al. (2018) "slowing down the economy is not an end but a likely outcome in a transition toward equitable wellbeing and environmental sustainability" (p. 297).

Post-growth

Post-growth thinkers argue that "no rate of economic growth, whether positive, negative or zero, is automatically correlated either with social benefit or harm or environmental goods or ills" (Likaj et al., 2022, p. 25). It is believed that the economy should be designed to achieve environmental and social goals. Hence, the focus should be on how to achieve these more just outcomes and not on whether this is paired with economic growth or not (Jensen, 2023). This position is also sometimes referred to as 'beyond growth' or 'a-growth.'

The different alternatives to growth, of course, also have common grounds, as they all aim for more sustainable operations. I believe that in the long run, the systemic change that degrowth and post-growth thinkers propose is necessary. The technological innovation that green growth relies on can help the transition towards reduced environmental impact but is not enough. Besides, its experimental nature also makes relying on it solely a big gamble. Considering the long-term future, we must go further and strive for more radical change. Hence, we must aim towards a post-growth world in which society is no longer organised around growth and instead focuses on what actually matters: planetary and human wellbeing. A post-growth society can be seen as the destination to which one can work towards. Degrowth can then be seen as one possible journey to get there but it is not the only one, as this depends on the context of a place. Thus, in the case of this investigation, it can be concluded that the aim is to work towards a post-growth Assen. Later, Assen will be analysed further to better understand what journey the city must take to reach the post-growth destination.



The conceptual framework in Figure 18 combines the problem statement with the theory. It summarises which main goals drive the growth paradigm (GDP increase) and which goals drive the alternative growth paradigm (environmental sustainability, wellbeing, equality and system resilience). The latter goals are based on a report entitled Beyond Growth: Towards a New Economic Approach by an OECD advisory group (OECD, 2020 mentioned in Likaj et al., 2022). The diagram shows that the pursuit of continuous GDP growth requires exploitation and leads to the exceeding of planetary boundaries. The post-growth paradigm, however, aims to improve planetary and human health to a sufficient level through just redistribution, which ensures consumption and production stay within the capacities of planetary ecosystems. To go from one paradigm to the other, a paradigm shift must take place. This requires cultural change, which can be achieved through 'what if' spatial planning and creating visions for alternative desirable futures. This is exactly what this thesis aims to do.

Fig 18. Conceptual framework.

Besides post-growth theory as key concept in this thesis, there are also other theories that shape the conceptual framework, including sufficientarianism and Doughnut Economics:

Sufficientarianism Post-growth thinking calls for a more equitable redistribution of wealth. This raises the question of what a fair distribution is. If growth is no longer the ultimate goal, it might be beneficial to think about sufficiency instead. This aligns with sufficientarianism. According to Frankfurt, “what is important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have *the same* but that each should have enough. If everyone had *enough*, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others” (Frankfurt, 1987, p. 21).

Doughnut Economics The earlier mentioned desirable balance between planetary boundaries and material and energy usage relates to The Doughnut of social and planetary boundaries developed by Kate Raworth. As illustrated in Figure 19, the Doughnut model consists of two rings: one inner ring representing social foundation and the outer ring representing ecological ceiling (Birgisdóttir et al., 2023). Between this social foundation and ecological ceiling lies a doughnut-shaped space. In this space, basic needs of people are met, and planetary boundaries are not exceeded. It represents the “ecologically safe and socially just space in which humanity can thrive” (Birgisdóttir et al., 2023, p. 25).

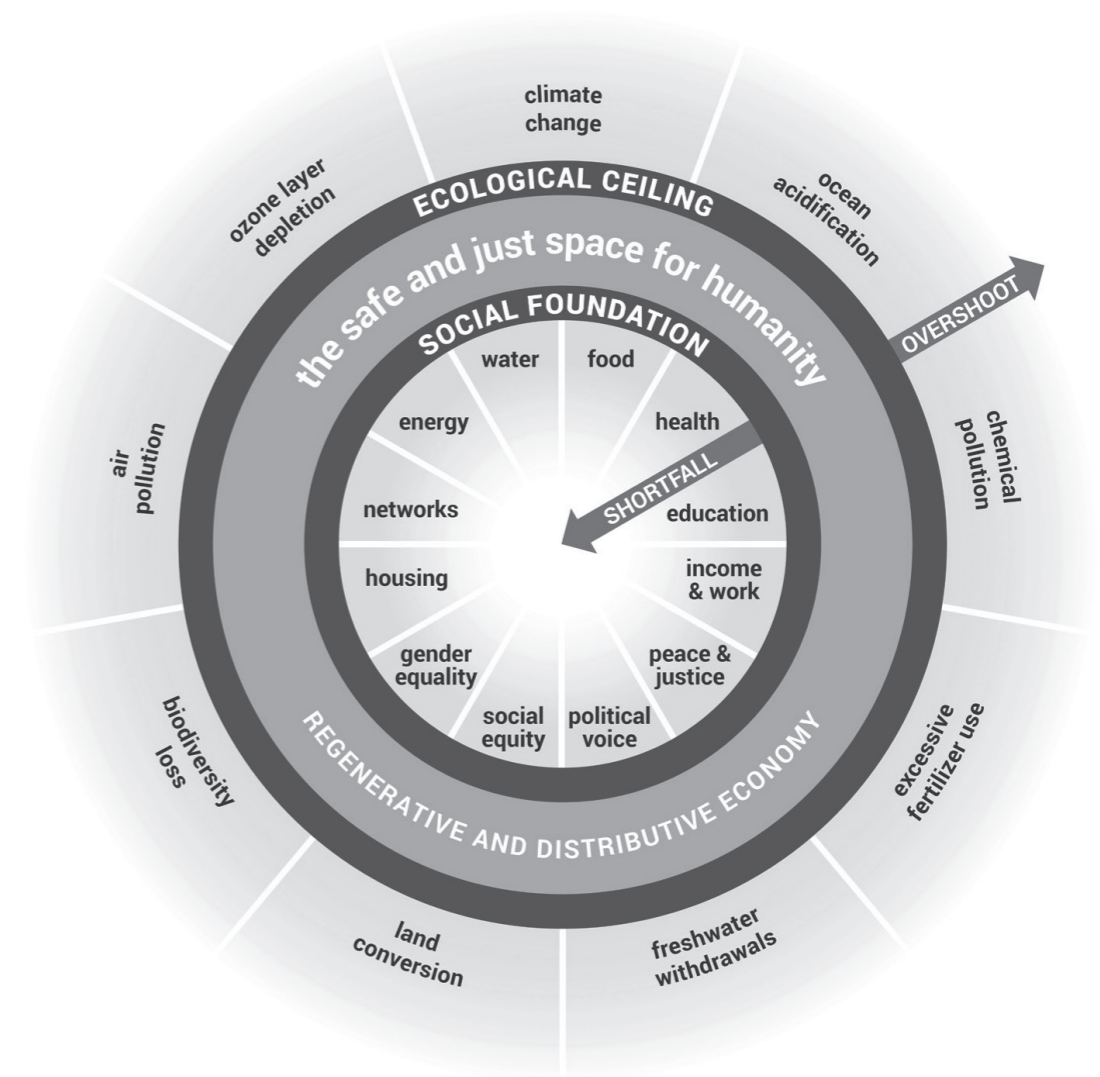


Fig 19. The Doughnut of social and planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2017; Birgisdóttir et al., 2023; modified).

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

The conceptual framework illustrates a shift from a growth to a post-growth paradigm. This shift seems almost impossibly difficult to realise. Especially if one solely focuses on what is not working well, it could lead to becoming overwhelmed or demotivated by the enormity of the tasks ahead. Hence, it might be more motivating to think about what is actually possible. This aligns with the Appreciative Inquiry approach. This approach aims to create change by using what is working well. It focuses on the system's strengths, its potential, and its successes (The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.). To identify and build upon those aspects that already work well, the 5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry will be applied (The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.). The cycle consists of the following steps:

1. Define
2. Discover
3. Dream
4. Design
5. Destiny

In the following paragraphs, it is explained what the different steps entail and how they are applied throughout this research and design process.

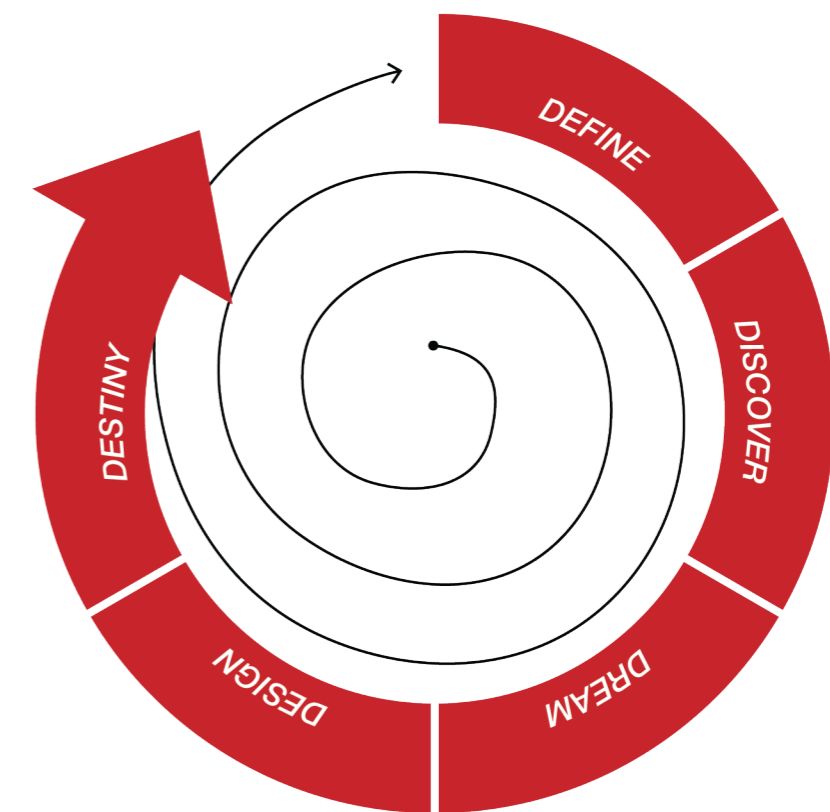


Fig 20. 5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry
(The Center For Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.;
modified).

Define The first step is about clearly framing the desired outcome. In this thesis so far, I have described the desired post-growth future in general, but it needs to be specificized for the case of Assen. Understanding the political context of Assen and relating it to current post-growth theory makes it possible to formulate specific goals for Assen that builds upon the current context. Therefore, an in-depth literature review of policies and the latest post-growth theory was conducted.

Discover After having defined the ambitions, local potential can be discovered. To increase the chance of the desired transformation happening, one can build upon what is already working well. To do so, it is necessary to better understand the identity of Assen. Hence, the history of Assen has been thoroughly analysed to understand where Assen comes from and how it has become the city it is today.

To discover the local identity further, I interviewed local experts. This aligns with Jane Jacobs' appreciation of the local perspective. As Gray (2020) puts it, "Where orthodox urban planners assume that the essential information in planning decisions can be gained through abstract principles and statistical aggregates, Jacobs makes the case for respecting local, man-on-the-spot knowledge." Locals possess an "invaluable reservoir of insights," which are at times overlooked (Sustainability Directory, 2025). As an outsider, it can be extremely enriching to talk with those who possess a detailed social, cultural, historical, and environmental understanding of the place in which they live and operate. They inform me, an outsider, with insights about not only the currently existing qualities but also about how Assen has developed over time and what is seen as important for the future. This more normative and bottom-up approach is in stark contrast with the top-down technocratic planning approach that has more dominantly shaped spatial development in the Netherlands and Assen. An Informed Consent form was used to ensure that all interviews will be conducted in an ethical and responsible manner.

Site visits to Assen were also conducted to personally observe the place and discover physical qualities. I walked through the city and looked around. According to Bobbink et al. (2021), our senses are used to the natural speed of walking. Hence, walking allows us to connect sensual perception to the physical spaces around us. Walking also allows you to observe how others interact with their surroundings. My observations were noted down and photographed. It helped to situate the local narratives and connect the stories with spatial qualities. Besides analysing the city from eye level, I also used QGIS-mapping and (digital) sketching to understand the city's structure from above and on different scales. The gained knowledge is summarised in soft maps.



Fig 21. Talking to local experts online (in phone booth) and in Assen to discover the city.

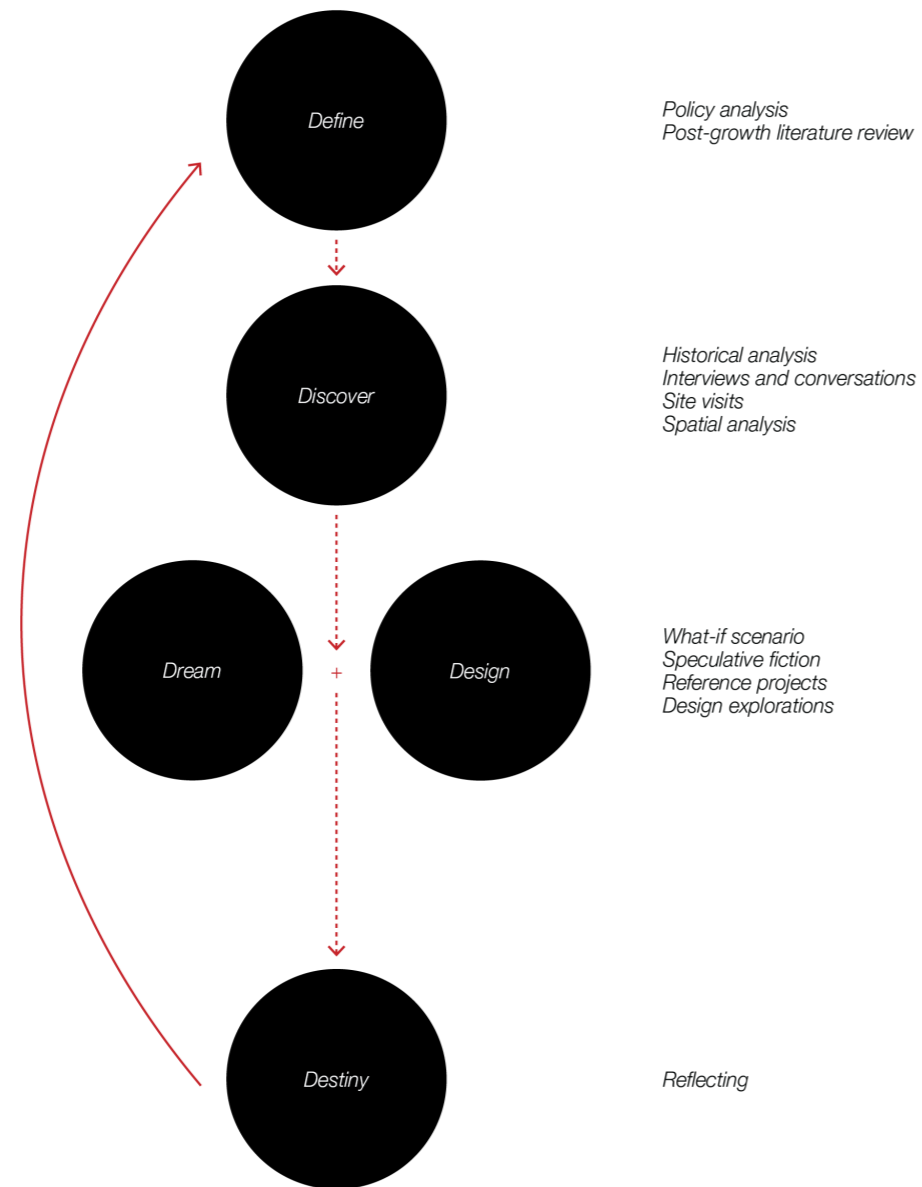


Fig 22. Overview of the different steps and corresponding methods.

Dream and design

The dream and design steps are combined for this project. The dreaming is about imagining what could be, while designing is about developing ways in which the dream can be realised (The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.). A speculative travel guide for the year 2076 does both. It explores what embracing the discovered post-growth qualities of Assen could lead to. This positive ‘what-if’ scenario is a long-term vision that assumes Assen has become an exemplary post-growth city. Using speculative fiction is an effective tool in “making abstract concepts tangible” (Taskale, 2025, p. 9). The guide shows concrete spatial interventions that build upon the discovered qualities. It shows that the dream can be made reality when wellbeing guides spatial decisions. Reference projects were consulted and design explorations were undertaken to help develop these concrete spatial designs.

Destiny

The destiny (or deliver) step focuses on creating “what will be” and about embedding the desired future into the community (The Appreciative Inquiry Commons, n.d.). Hence, I critically reflect on the original research question of how the spatial application of post-growth theory can foster an alternative sustainable future for the city of Assen. This includes a discussion about what should happen today to achieve the desired post-growth future and how this journey could become a collective commitment. The actual living out of the dream goes beyond this project and requires long-term thinking. This 5D-model is cyclical, meaning that the transformation is continuous and requires ongoing improvement. Hence, this project can be seen as a starting point.

The Appreciative Inquiry method is used to investigate how a post-growth Assen can be reached. By following this approach, the other sub-research questions were answered on

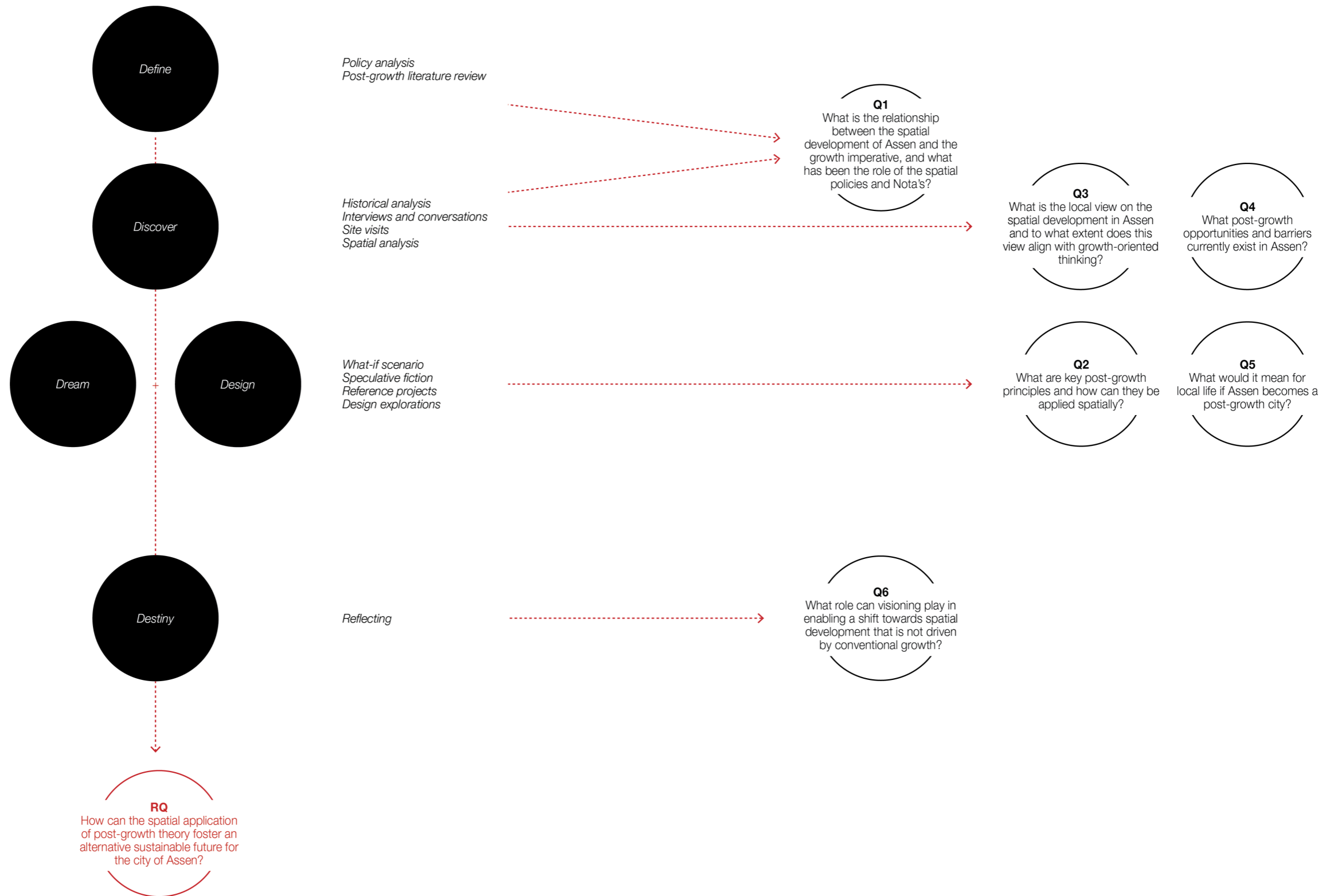


Fig 23. Overview of how the different steps will answer the set research questions.

PLANNING To ensure that the ambitious steps take place within the time span of the graduation process, a planning was made. The planning shows how gained knowledge from each step of the Appreciative Inquiry approach informed and enriched the subsequent steps.

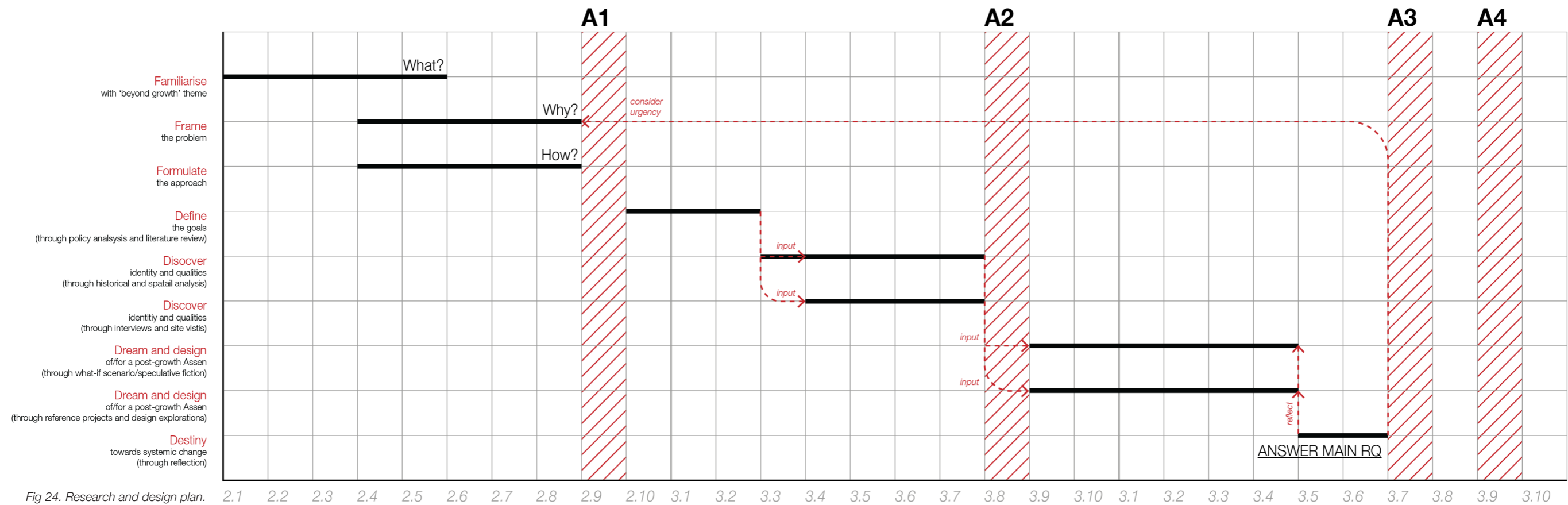


Fig 24. Research and design plan.

03.

(Re)define

goals

BUILDING UPON EXISTING PRINCIPLES

Earlier in the report the ambitions and goals of the Municipality of Assen have been discussed at length. To understand them even better, I have analysed the latest Spatial Strategy (Omgevingsvisie) of Assen. This Spatial Strategy was originally adopted in 2021 but was recently updated and re-adopted by the municipal council on February 2026 (Gemeente Assen, 2026). In a conversation with Bart van Leeuwen, Spatial Advisor to the Municipality of Assen, he mentioned that the appointment of the region Groningen-Assen as an “Initiate”-region will lead to new visions (Van Leeuwen, 2026). It is predicted that these will include even more ambitious growth plans.

In line with my appreciative approach, I also aimed to find potential while reading the current Spatial Strategy of Assen. I found that the three main guiding principles actually have post-growth potential (Gemeente Assen, 2026). In short, they are:

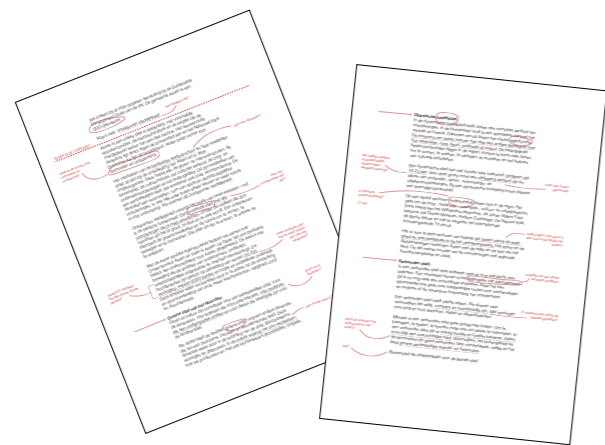
- Connected City (Verbonden stad)
- Green City of the North (Groene stad van het Noorden)
- Dynamic Capital City (Dynamische hoofdstad)

These three principles could have post-growth potential, as a connected, green and lively city can contribute to improving the wellbeing of citizens and the natural ecological system. However, this is not the case if the underlying motive remains to improve the competitive position of Assen and to attract businesses. When looking at the goals in more detail (see Appendix I), it seems like an underlying economic growth motive is clearly present. The ambition of building 10,000 and creating 5,000 jobs is also mentioned in the vision and even the ambition to make Assen a green city is also related to contributing to a favourable business climate (Gemeente Assen, 2026).

Hence, to create goals that will help Assen reach its post-growth potential, the existing goals should be redefined and specified. Hence, gained knowledge from reading post-growth literature is applied. A lot of this literature was read when learning about degrowth and post-growth at the beginning when framing my research objective. These include the books ‘There is life after growth: How we can realistically secure our future’ (in Dutch: ‘Er is leven na de groei: Hoe we onze toekomst realistisch veiligstellen’) by Paul Schenderling (2022) and Jason Hickel’s ‘Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World’ (2020). Other important literature include Post-Growth City by BURA and CRIMSON Historians and Urbanists (2024) and a working paper by Van Der Rijt et al. (n.d.) that discusses examples of national and local policy measures that contribute to a post-growth society. Finally Postgrowth Marineterrein (in Dutch: ‘Postgroei Marineterrein’) was read and the book launch was visited (AMS institute et al., 2026). All of this formed a good understanding of what (spatial) development based on post-growth values could entail. This not only inspired later design explorations but also helped to specify the spatial goals of Assen.



Fig 25. Reading post-growth literature.



If we reinterpret the existing principles...

- ~~X~~ Connected City
- ~~X~~ Green City of the North
- ~~X~~ Dynamic Captical City

... with a post-growth lens:

- A city in which people belong, where inhabitants care for and look after each other.
- A city that is part of the natural ecosystem and creates space for flora and fauna to flourish.
- A city that is active and inspiring, enabling personal growth.

To reach a post-growth Assen that...

... is centred around planetary and human health and wellbeing.

Fig 26. Overview of redefined design principles (AMS institute et al., 2026; BURA & Crimson Historians & Urbanists, 2023; Gemeente Assen, 2026; Hickel, 2020; Schenderling,2022; Van Der Rijt et al., n.d.; modified.

Above is an overview of how the three design principles are redefined with a post-growth lens. The following step is to discover which qualities of Assen are there (or were there in the past) that can help achieve these set goals.

04.

Discover

local qualities

So far, I have taken a somewhat top-down approach. Based on theory, frameworks and concepts, the relevance of shifting towards a post-growth future for Assen has been explained. What is still lacking, however, is how this alternative future can actually work in Assen. Fitting with the appreciative inquiry methodology, I wanted to investigate which qualities are there already that could be used to transform Assen into a post-growth city. To discover these qualities, a deep dive into the identity of Assen is required. Firstly, through analysing its history and then by talking to local experts and walking through the city. Especially through the conversations and local observations, a more bottom-up perspective is generated.

HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION

Discovering these local qualities of Assen starts with understanding its history. Appreciating the city's past helps to transform the city in such a way that is fitting. Reading 'The Historic Atlas of Assen' ('De Historische Atlas van Assen') proved to be extremely helpful in discovering the unique history of the city. The following timelines show an overview of this discovered history of Assen (Battjes & Brink, 2009).



Fig 27. Watercolour drawing from *The Historic Atlas of Assen*. It was created around 1815 and is one of the oldest depictions of the canal (DM, 1815; modified).

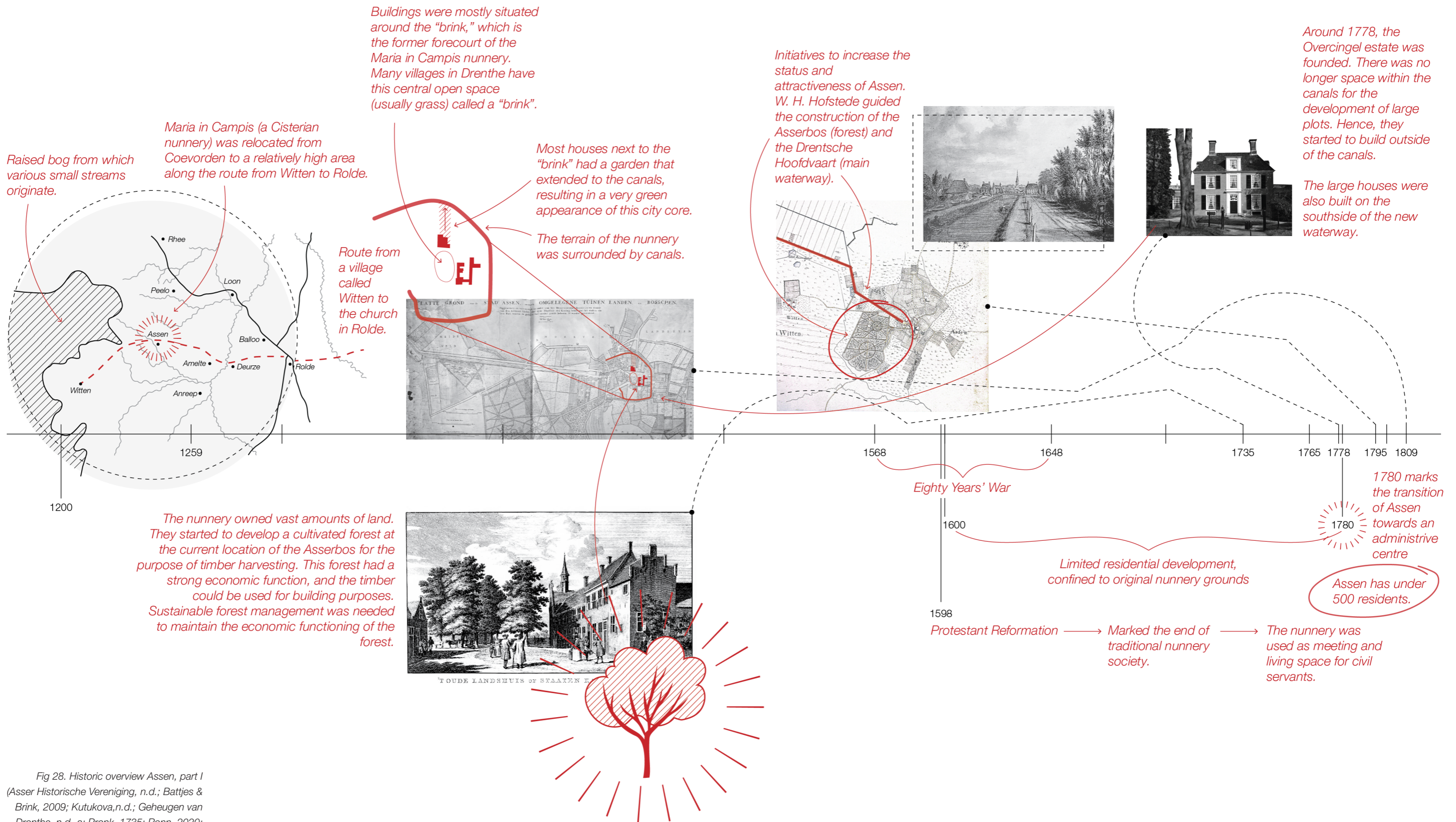
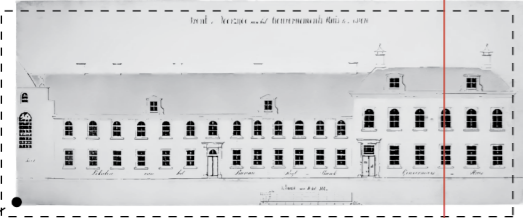


Fig 28. Historic overview Assen, part I (Asser Historische Vereniging, n.d.; Battjes & Brink, 2009; Kutukova, n.d.; Geheugen van Drenthe, n.d.-a; Pronk, 1735; Ronn, 2020; Vereniging van Vrienden van het Asserbos, n.d.; modified).

In 1811, Drenthe became an "arrondissement" (jurisdiction area of a court) with a court in Assen. The city became a place where administrative and judicial power concentrated.

In 1814, Drenthe became a province within the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Assen became its capital. The capital city status of Assen had a great impact on future development of the city.



In 1807, Assen became an independent municipality.

Drenthe was part of The Kingdom of Holland, with king Lodewijk Napoleon. He was in favour of treating all regions equally, which is why he gave Assen city rights in 1809.

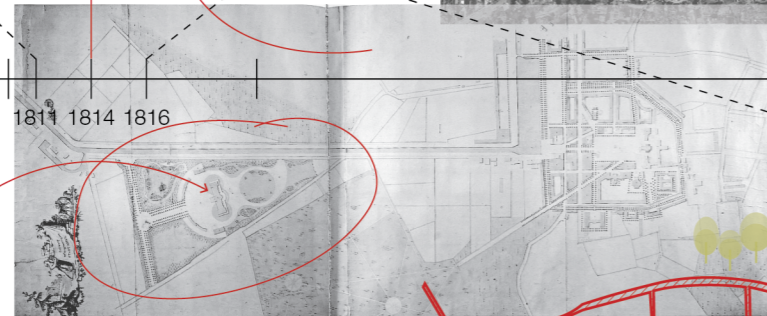
The king provided funding for the development of houses. The street where these were built is still called "Nieuwehuizen" ("New Houses") to this day. The streets Torenlaan, Brinkstraat, and Nieuwehuizen were all built in 1809.

Torenlaan
Brinkstraat
Nieuwehuizen

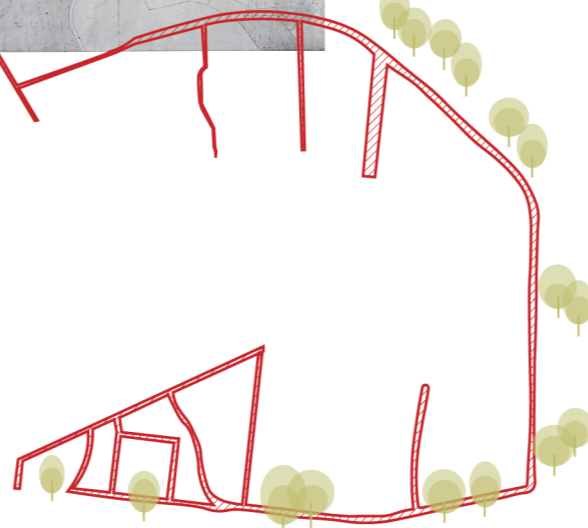


1800 1807 1809 1811 1814 1816

The 'summer palace' for Lodewijk Napoleon.



In 1809, Assen only had around 600 residents, which is way lower than the legally required number of inhabitants to gain city rights. Hence, the king gave Giudici (an architect from Rotterdam) the task to create an expansion plan for 6000 residents. The ruling of Lodewijk Napoleon ended a year later, so the plans never really came to realisation.



Assen used to be surrounded by a ring canal. These canals were later muted. The map from around 1880 already shows that the northern part of the canal had become a road.



Assen did not originate as a compact fortified city. Hence, it was very much integrated with the surrounding nature. There was enough space to incorporate greenery with the urban development. This is why Assen became known as the "The City in the Green."

De "City of Palaces" became an attractive place of residence for notables in Drenthe. Due to its province status, government services establishments came to the city. This attracted more middle class.

Assen did not have a large industrial sector in the 19th century.

Vredeveld estate.

The Noord-Willems canal was dug. It opened in 1861.

The rail connection was developed between 1868 and 1870

Fig 29. Historic overview Assen, part II (Asser Historische Vereniging, n.d.; Battjes & Brink, 2009; Google, 2025; Kutukova, n.d.; OKRA, 2020; Station, n.d.; modified).

Policymakers believed that big industrial companies did not fit with the attractive living environment of Assen. That is why the service sector remained the most dominant sector in Assen.



The Dutch Housing Act of 1901 came into effect in 1902. It required municipalities to plan and improve the living conditions.

In 1900 the municipality of Assen has about 11,000 residents of which 6,000 live in the city.

In 1915, the council adopted an expansion plan by architect P.M.A. Huurman. In reality, the plan was not followed very strictly.

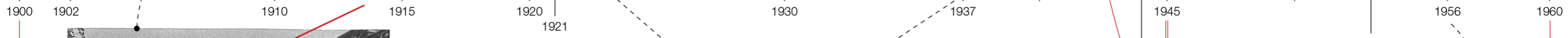
Around the 1920s and early 1930, many middle-class homes were built along the arterial roads.

There was strong local resistance against the building of a road through the Asserbos.



The municipality of Assen has about 20,000 residents in 1937.

The green character of Assen being promoted.



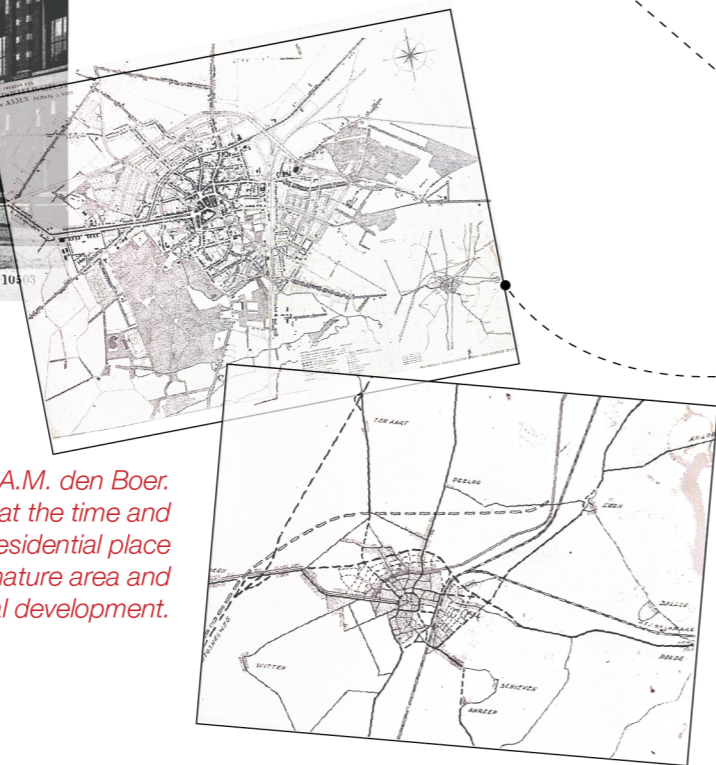
The number of homes increased from 2,300 to 5,000 between 1900 and 1945.

The number of homes increased from 5,000 to 7,000 between 1945 and 1960.

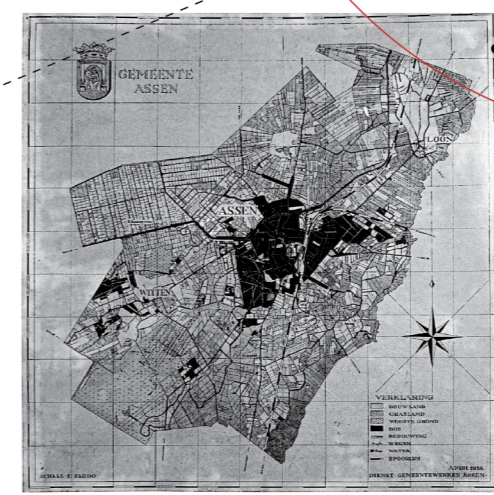
This was still a quite gradual growth.



Around the end of the 19th century, three barracks buildings appeared along the Vaart in Assen. Assen became both, a centre for bureaucratic and military purposes.



In 1944/1945 an expansion plan was developed by ir. J.A.M. den Boer. He was the director of the Provincial Planning Service at the time and believed that Assen should focus on being an attractive residential place for civil servants. He wanted to protect the Drentsche Aa nature area and argued against industrial development.



The development at the north side of the old Noord-Willems canal had to have a rural character with a more urban tendency. In reality, this meant that more flats were being built.

This map from 1956 shows Assen as a compact city with some ribbon development. The city is connected with its green surrounding on all sides. This is because all the main roads pass through the city centre and there are no large ring roads surrounding the city yet.

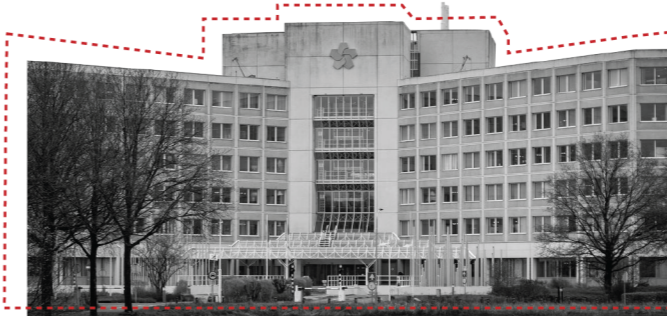
Fig 30. Historic overview Assen, part I (Asser Historische Vereniging, n.d.; Battjes & Brink, 2009; modified).



In 1958, major Popke Pieter Agter of Assen announced that the municipality of Assen has reached a turning point. According to him:

"The old administrative centre, the old garrison town, is growing into a medium-sized, modern city."

Zones for industrial activity increased.



The headquarters of NAM (Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij, or Dutch Petroleum Company) move to Assen.

Draft 1974 Structural Plan

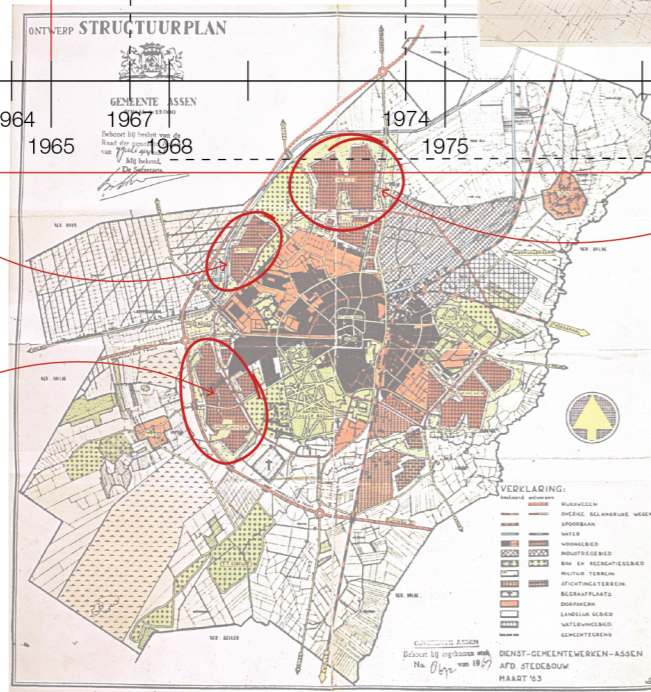


This photo from 1975 shows the large-scale expansion of the shopping area. The grain size has increased significantly. Space was made for large retail companies.

The municipality of Assen has in 2026 around 70,700 inhabitants.

In 1959, Assen was assigned to become an industrial hub. This was ought to improve the economic function of the city and region and stimulate employment.

In the past, growth was facilitated by building new streets and smaller residential areas. Around the mid-1960s this changed. Now, whole new neighbourhoods were built.



Pittelo: 1,400 homes.

Baggelhuizen: 1,500 homes.

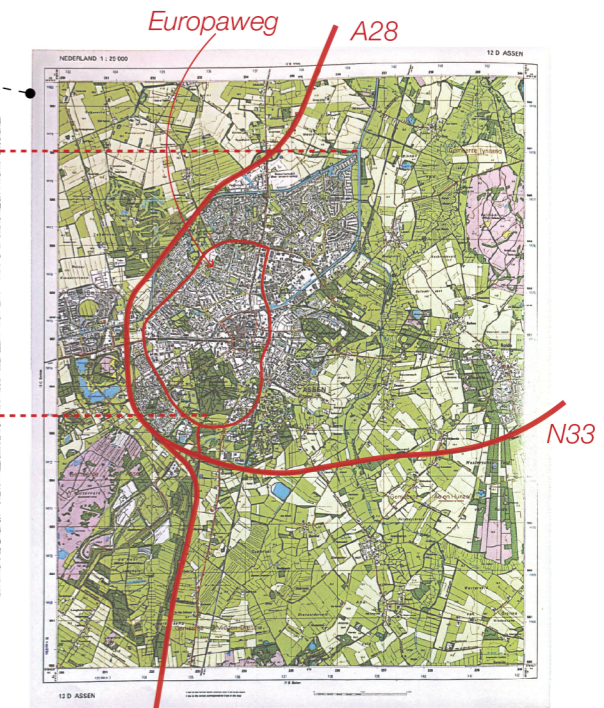
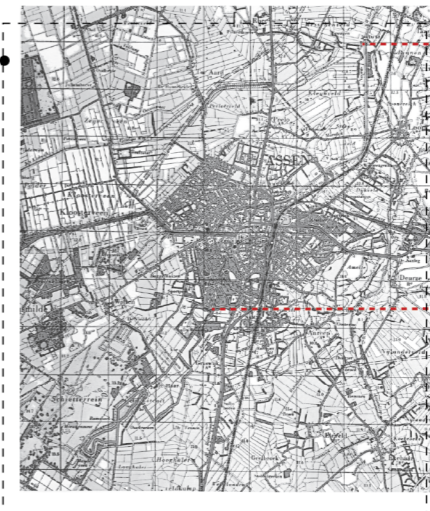
Peelo: 2,900 homes.

This new envisioned trajectory for the city was translated in the 1964 Structural Plan for Assen. It proposed an enormous increase in scale in terms of population, housing, infrastructure, facilities, and jobs.

The speed of building increased significantly. The number of houses increased between 1960 and 2009 from 7,400 to 29,000.

The gradual growth of Assen has ended.

Since the beginning of the 1970s, the road structure of Assen changed drastically. The A28 and Europaweg redirected traffic around the city.



These two maps show how Assen has grown explosively since the late 1960s. Whole new neighbourhoods were rapidly built, industrial terrains expanded, and infrastructure for car-use shaped the city.

Since the 1960s, the city has conducted an active urban renewal program. Houses had to be demolished for the new large-scale retail shops.

Fig 31. Historic overview Assen, part IV (Asser Historische Vereniging, n.d.; Battjes & Brink, 2009; Van Bilsen, 1963; Van Flymen & ANP, 2021; modified).

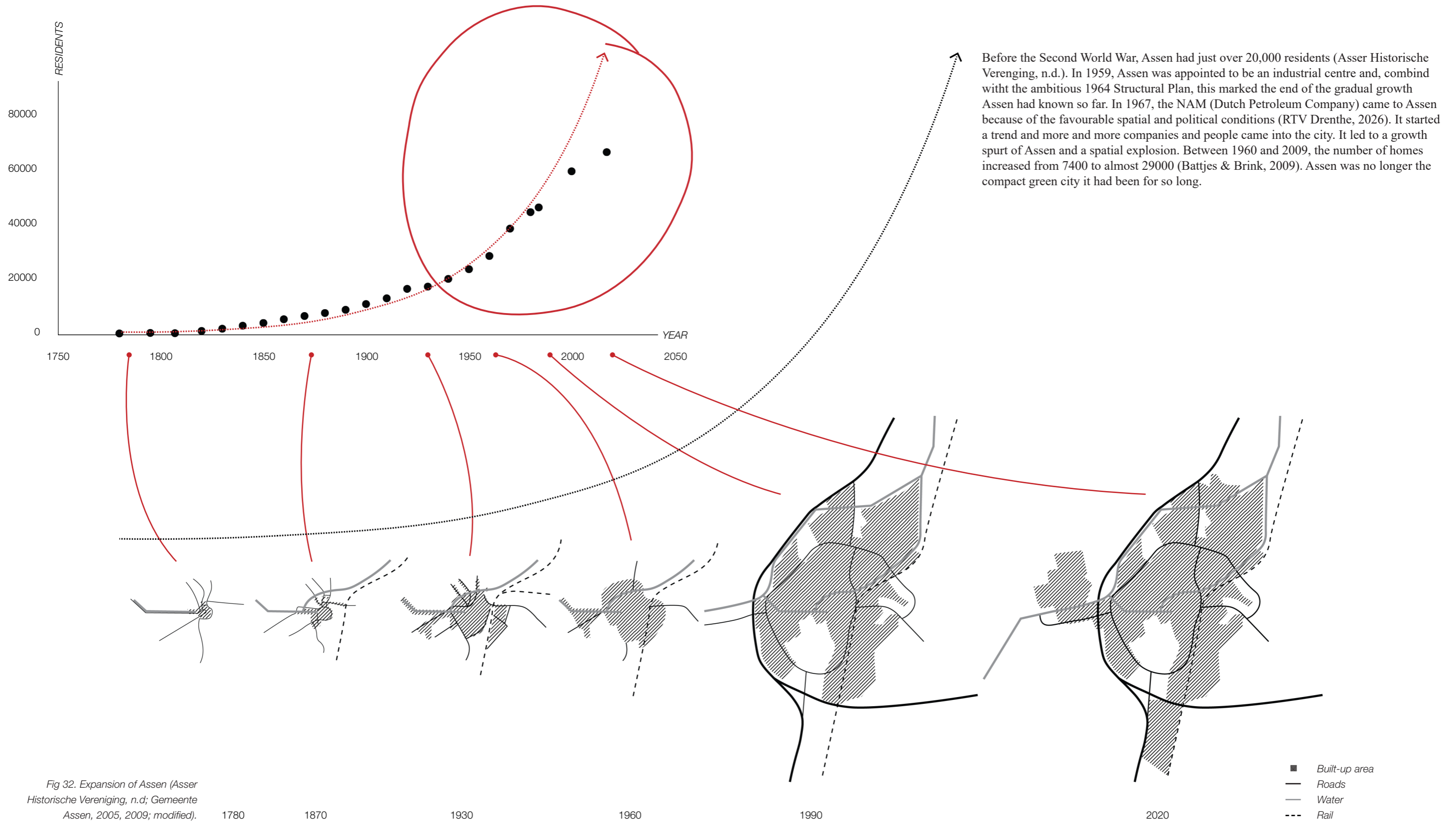
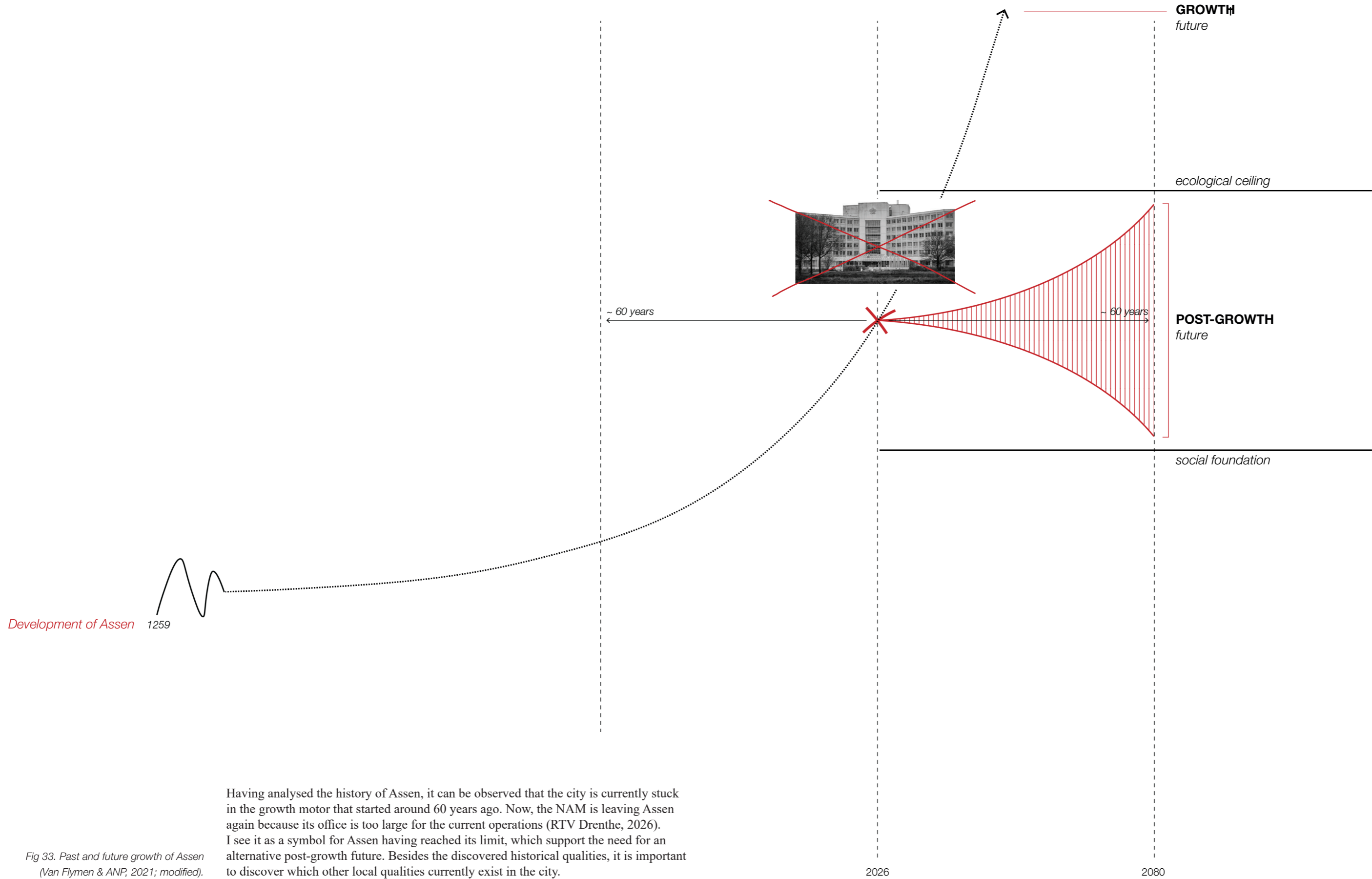


Fig 32. Expansion of Assen (Asser Historische Vereniging, n.d.; Gemeente Assen, 2005, 2009; modified).



Having analysed the history of Assen, it can be observed that the city is currently stuck in the growth motor that started around 60 years ago. Now, the NAM is leaving Assen again because its office is too large for the current operations (RTV Drenthe, 2026). I see it as a symbol for Assen having reached its limit, which support the need for an alternative post-growth future. Besides the discovered historical qualities, it is important to discover which other local qualities currently exist in the city.

Fig 33. Past and future growth of Assen (Van Flymen & ANP, 2021; modified).

TALKING At the start of the project, I knew only very little about Assen. In fact, I had never been there. Through reading literature about the city, I had learned a lot about its history, policies and structure. To gain a better understanding of its identity, however, I wanted to talk to people who actually live and work there.

Due to the limited time available I decided to talk to local experts. I figured that they contain a vast amount of knowledge about the city and its functioning. Hence, one conversation would already provide me with many insights about what type of city Assen is. Finding these experts started with my mentor, Zef Hemel, sharing some of his contacts with me. From there, a snowball effect occurred. When talking to individuals they often referred me to others with whom I could talk to further. They gave me insights into the identity and characteristics of the city. The method of conducting the interviews was open. I saw it more as a conversation rather than a structured set of questions. I mainly wanted to figure out whether there was post-growth potential on which I could further build upon. Hence, I mostly asked about what development is currently happening in Assen. Furthermore, I asked about what aspects of the city they liked and what could be improved.

Table 2 provides an overview of all the people I talked to. I mostly talked to spatial experts who work with or for the Municipality of Assen, such as urban planners and designers, spatial program managers and advisors, or housing advisors. They take active part in the managing and shaping of the city, so talking to them would inform me about how the city has been transforming and is planning to transform in the future. Their spatial expertise also allowed them to critically reflect on different types of spatial development and its effect on the city. To better understand Assen and its context, I also zoomed out and talked to people from the economic, social and housing department, as well as an expert on the Drentsche Aa National Park. Collectively, they provided me with a comprehensive overview of the types of decisions that are being made and why. I, for instance, learned about the reluctance of the city to reduce car-usage in the city even though the interviewees argued that it could have positive effects on the spatial experience of the city and on the health of its residents. I also learned about the historical and cultural identity of the Drentsche Aa, which has to constantly be protected from urban expansion. I learned about the designated quiet zones, about the pleasant balance between open and closed spaces, and about the experienced droughts in the summer. All of these examples acted as inspiration of what Assen could work with and build upon.

To zoom in further, I also wanted to talk to people who operate more on the neighbourhood scale. Therefore, I reached out to MijnBuurtAssen who connected me with neighbourhood coordinators. From these conversations, I learned more about local initiatives, such as vegetable gardens and a neighbourhood shed (buurtschuur) in Assen Oost, and how they can help build communities. Similar insights were also gained by talking to local artists in Assen. They informed me about local cultural activities, such as the Art of Wonder Festival. These types of local stories fit with post-growth development, as they are about creating communal connections and supporting self-improvement. Talking to residents, I also learned about what they value about the city they live in. The green character of the city and its peaceful and calm atmosphere was mentioned many times. These discovered inspiring and positive qualities fit with Assen as a smaller, intimate city. A city with qualities of a village.

Table 2. Overview of interviewed local experts (some names have been anonymised, as they have not filled out the Informed Consent form).

Date	Person	Role
27/11/2025 and other moments	Ben Vierkant	Former resident of Assen and student Management in the Built Environment at TU Delft.
28/01/2026	Tess Broekmans	Professor Urban Design and partner of Urhahn Urban Design
30/01/2026	Gert Wijlage	DEfKa (Departement voor Filisofie en Kunst-Assen) researcher, philosopher, and artist
13/02/2026	Pieter Gautier	Senior Spatial Planning and Physical Environment Advisor (Senior Adviseur Ruimte & Fysieke Leefomgeving) for the Municipality of Assen
17/02/2026	Kees Folkertsma	District Coordinator (Gebiedsregisseur) of the Drentsche Aa National Park
27/02/2026	Bart van Leeuwen	Spatial Advisor (Ruimtelijk Supervisor) for the municipality of Assen and partner of De Zwarte Hond
27/02/2026	Ronald Löhr	Project Manager of Zuidoost Assen for the Municipality of Assen
02/03/2026	Ria Lubbinge	Senior Housing Policy Advisor (Senior Beleidsadviseur Wonen) for the Municipality of Assen
03/03/2026	Anonymous	Economic expert from the Municipality of Assen
04/03/2026	Gert Wijlage and friends	This time Gert was accompanied by his artist friends
06/03/2026	Roel Hilberts	Senior Urban Planner (Senior Stedenbouwkundige) for the Municipality of Assen
11/03/2026	Bernadine Bolwijn	Neighbourhood Coordinator (Wijkcoördinator) Municipality of Assen, Assen Oost and Lariks
16/03/2026	Josien Tuhumury	Neighbourhood Coordinator (Wijkcoördinator) Municipality of Assen, Centrum
17/03/2026	Ineke Cleef	Program Manager for the Social City of Assen (Programmamanager Sociale Stad Assen)
19/03/2026	Anonymous	Program Manager for the Municipality of Assen
20/03/2026 and 11/05/2026	Hans Snijders	Director/partner of AURA stad en landschap and Senior Advisor Urban Planning (Senior Stedenbouwkundige/RO Adviseur for the Municipality of Assen.



Fig 34. Phone booth at the faculty.

Through the interviews, I also found out about the concerns regarding the development of the city. They were mostly related to the spaces that have become forgotten and are lacking activity or liveliness. It was mentioned that the city is, for instance, struggling with continuous vacancy in the centre, consists of large anonymous boxes, and can feel fragmented. Furthermore, there is a fear that facilities and activities are disappearing from Assen. This is intensified by an individualising and aging population that also risks becoming increasingly unhealthy and lonely. I wondered whether these raised concerns can be effectively solved if the city continues its current approach to growth. Continued urban expansion will spread out the city and its activities even more. It will shift the focus to new areas, risking that existing neighbourhoods and districts are neglected. Hence, these insights further supported the idea that a shift to a post-growth alternative might be more effective. It also showed that in order to get to this postgrowth future and improve wellbeing, these types of negative development must be countered.

The conversations with local experts helped me to discover the duality of Assen. I learned that the characteristics that make Assen unique, namely its green and peaceful character, seem to clash with a policy that is aimed at making Assen an efficient and large economic capital. This realization was backed up through conversations with Gert Wijlage and his artists friends (2026). During our conversation, the paradox was mentioned that Assen is on one hand considered to be a city in the green but on the other hand is also known for its TT Assen motorcycle racing, which consists of vast paved areas and many vehicles whose emissions negatively impact ecological systems. As a middle-sized city, it seemed that Assen is operating between two different scales: the intimate small-scale and the high-speed large-scale. If Assen tries to be both at the same time, it risks becoming neither. It can result in spaces that are meaningless and could exist in every other similar-sized city.

WALKING

Besides conducting interviews, I also walked and biked around in Assen. It helped me to connect stories to physical spaces. Walking around the historic heart of the city (de brink), I was impressed by how calm, intimate, and green this part of the city felt. Furthermore, I stopped and photographed the many flourishing Crocus flowers when I walked towards the Gouverneurstuin during a visit in the beginning of March. I also walked through the Drentsche Aa National Park and enjoyed the sight of seemingly untamed nature. As an outsider, I am not as used to the qualities that locals of Assen might consider normal or part of everyday life. The size and quantity of the green in and around Assen was fascinating to me and I found that it makes Assen different from other places. I saw these as places whose design principles and general atmosphere can be extended to other parts of the city as well. The intimate feeling of the brink and the dynamic alternation between open and closed spaces of the Drentsche Aa could be applied to other parts of Assen. It fits with post-growth development, as it is related to adding quality instead of quantity.

Walking through the city I also saw the consequences of the growth spurt of Assen. The northern expansion of the city centre (part of Komplan-Noord from 1972) is a good example of this. The transformation of the city core meant an expansion of the current retail stock towards the north and an increase in “grain size” of the buildings. Walking from the city core towards the north, this increase in scale was clearly visible. The surrounding now consisted of large commercial buildings and shopping centres. Although some facades were meant to sell goods to people passing by, many others were closed off to the surrounding. I took pictures of the backsides that were created as a result of these inwards-oriented buildings. These types of spaces didn’t feel inviting to stay in and also felt like many other shopping centres I had been to. In short, they seemed to lack character. This could also be because this part of the city was developed to be easily accessible by car. This car-oriented development was a common theme I noticed whilst walking through Assen. Also, these types of observations were inspiring. Reintroducing the human scale again could help make these spaces inviting to stay in instead of solely pass through.

Relating the observations made with findings from interviews reduces the risk of the observations and conclusions being too personal or one-sided. Combining the stories with personal observations helped to strengthen the overall interpretation of the city. Besides my personal conviction that wellbeing-oriented development is important, many people who I interviewed similarly emphasized the importance of social interaction, good health, liveliness and access to high quality green.

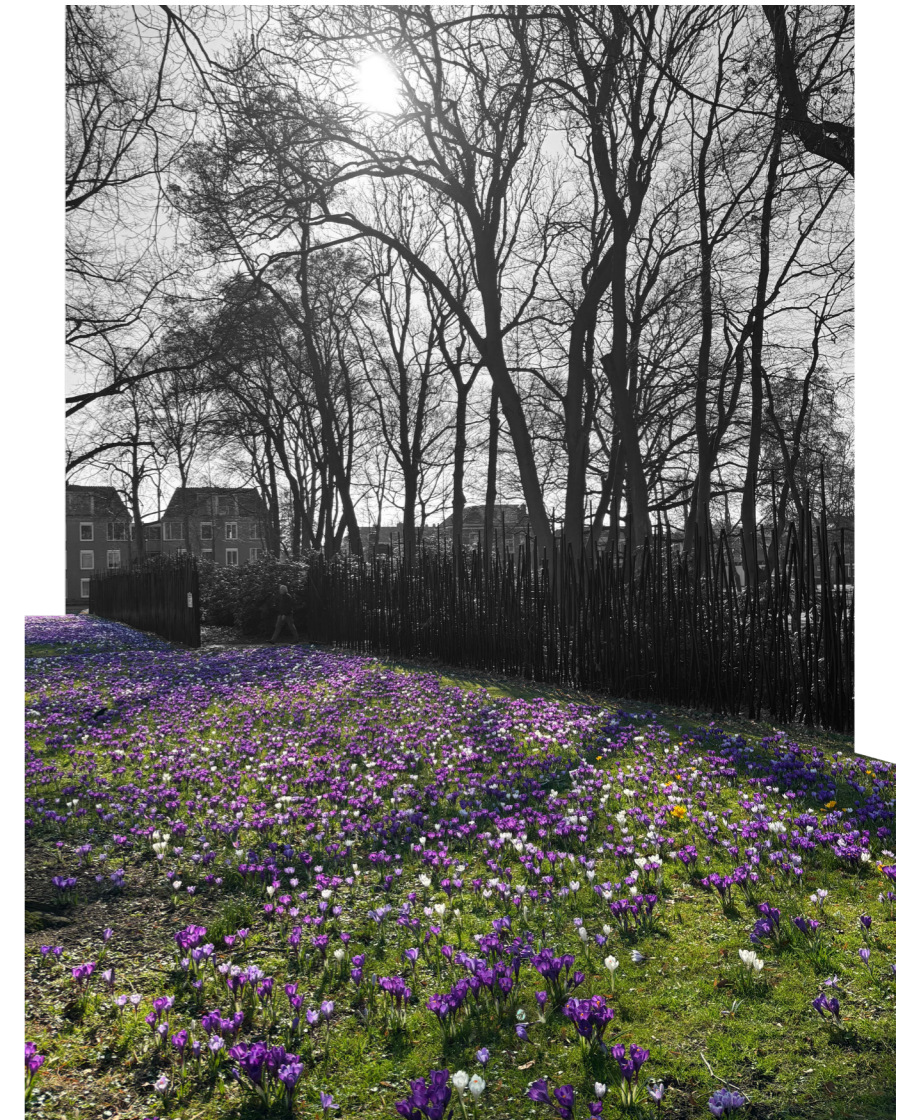
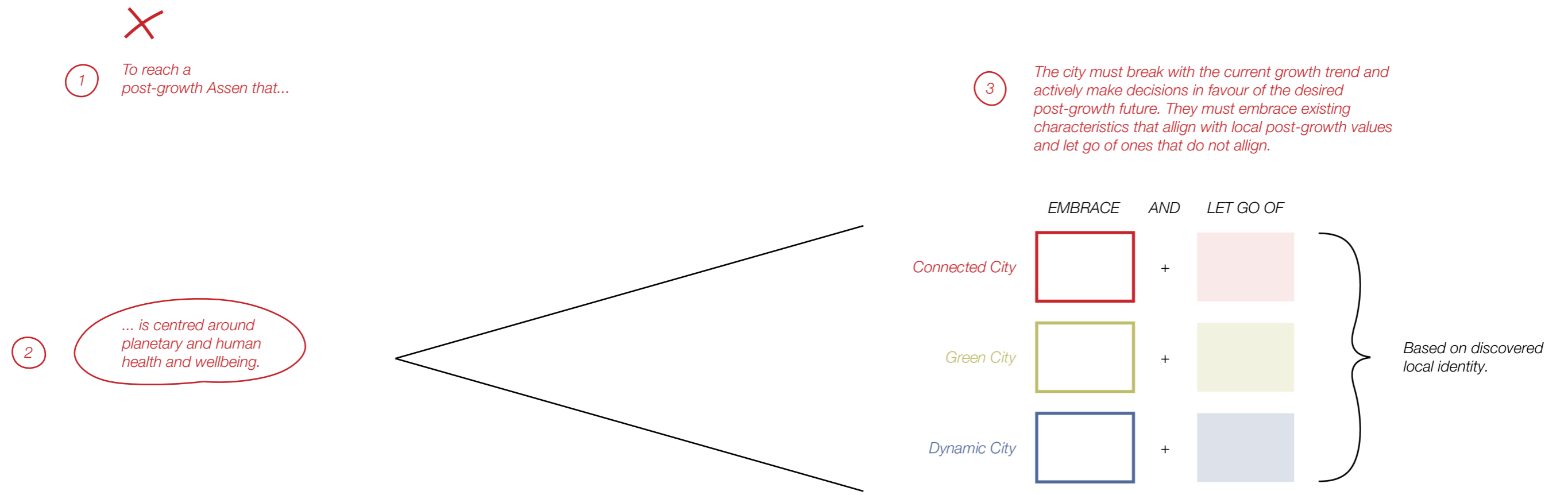


Fig 35. Crocus flowers noticed while walking through the city.



Fig 36. Walking through the Drentsche Aa, gaining an appreciation of the green character of Assen and its surrounding (Breen, 2025b; modified).



DIRECTION

Both the interviews and spatial observations showed that Assen has plenty post-growth potential which can be further build upon. Hence, when developing the city to improve human and planetary wellbeing, it must actively decide to enhance those qualities that are in favour of it. At the same time, Assen must be conscious of steering away from growth-obsessed development, as this could counteract the desired outcome. The following pages provide an overview of which qualities the city should embrace and which one they should actively let go of. The latter might seem counterintuitive to the Appreciative Inquiry method. However, Bushe (2007) argues that the appreciative approach is not just about positivity and suggests calling it “Generative Inquiry” instead (p. 1). I believe that in order to generate a different post-growth way of spatial development, it must also be clear what kind of development no longer fits. Framing this as a process of “letting go” emphasises that it is something we can undertake collectively, signalling hope. Both types of discovered local qualities are divided into the different overarching goals of the Connected City, Green City and the Dynamic City.

Fig 37. Overview of embracing and letting go.

Sheets that show discovered existing qualities that align with post-growth thinking.

Sheets that show discovered counterproductive growth-obsessed behavior.

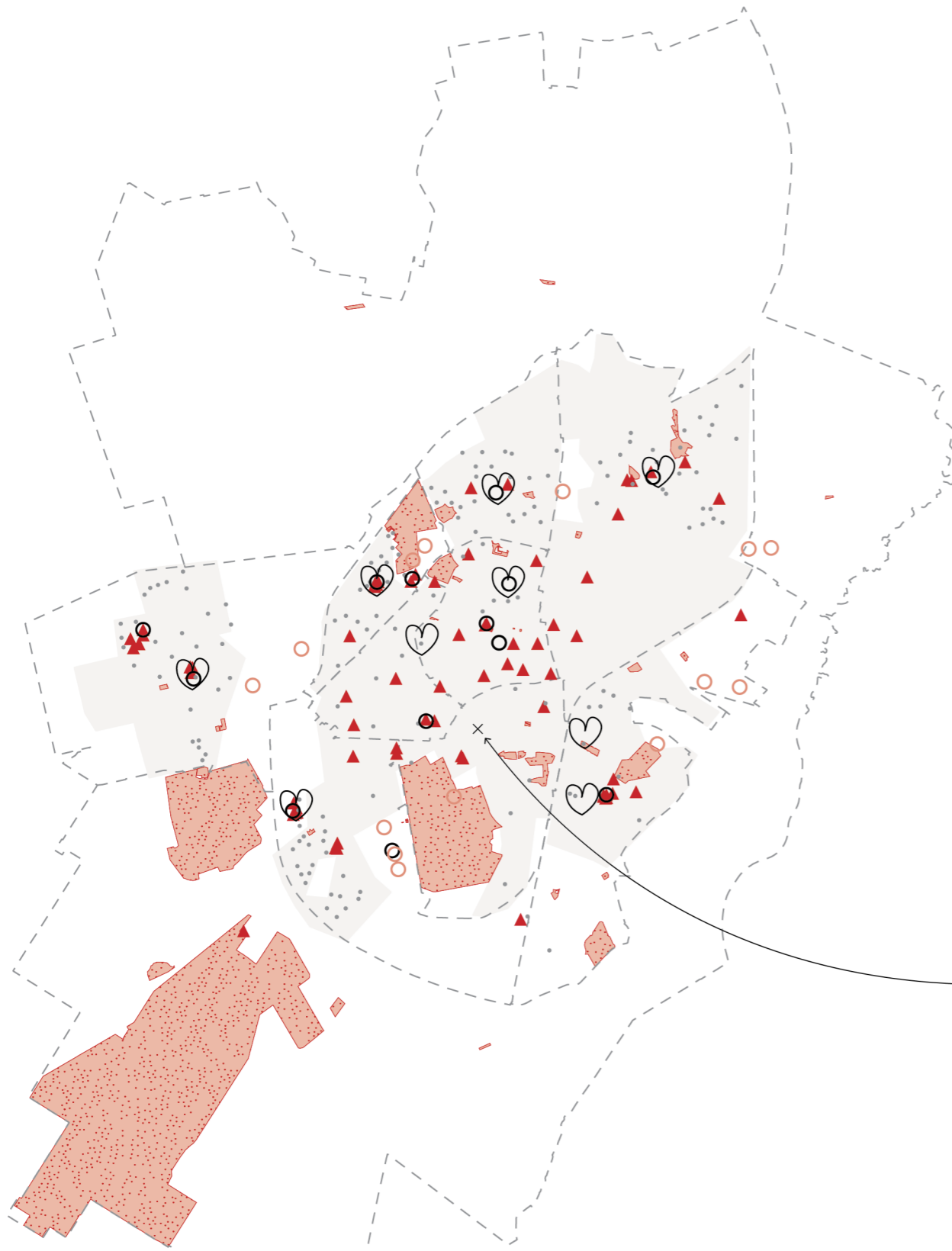
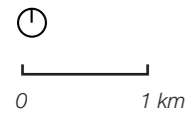
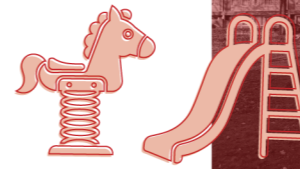


Fig 38. Places to meet and interact (Cultureel Kwartier De Nieuwe Kolk, n.d.; Gemeente Assen et al., 2026; Gemeente Assen, 2023; Google, 2025; Internationaal Filmfestival Assen, n.d.; Logo FC Assen, n.d.; Logo of Asser Christelijke Voetbalvereniging, n.d.; Wijkcentrum De Componist, 2026; modified).



PLAYGROUNDS
Playing with others is important for physical and social development of children



COMMUNITY CENTRES

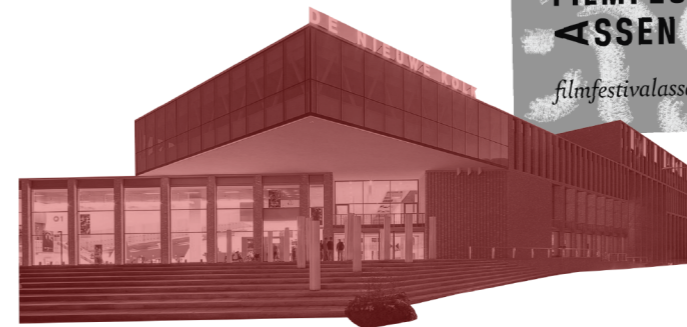
Neighbourhood community centres offer an easily accessible meeting place. They can help combat loneliness and can offer a range of activities that bring people closer together.



INTERNATIONAAL FILMFESTIVAL ASSEN
filmfestivalassen.nl

5 t/m 8 maart 2026

The Assen International Film Festival is a meeting place for film lovers where women have the main role, in front of and behind the camera.



CULTURAL FACILITIES

De Nieuwe Kolk is a cultural centre with theatre, cinema and library in Assen.

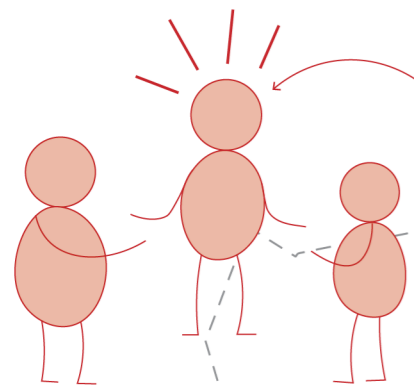
SPORT FACILITIES

Good facilities at neighbourhood level to make exercise accessible and fun.



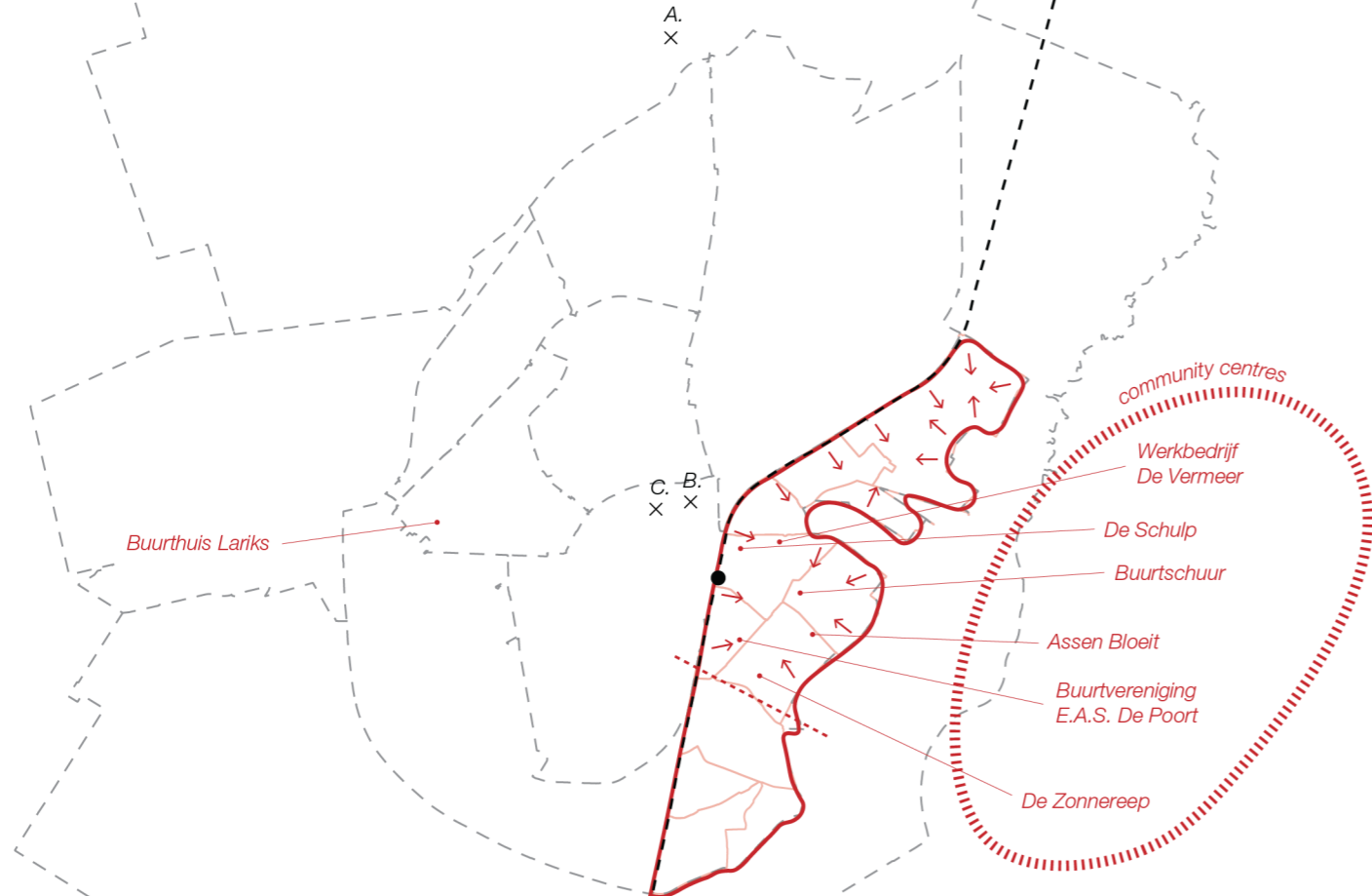
- Municipality of Assen
- Playgrounds
- ▲ Education
- ♥ Community centres
- Outdoor sport facilities
- Indoor sport facilities
- Recreational green
- Built-up area

EMBRACE
PLACES TO MEET AND INTERACT



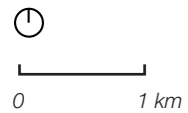
COMMUNITY CONNECTORS

Vaart Welzijn (non-profit organisation offering local support to inhabitants) have approached people to become community connectors. These community connectors play an important role in activating the neighbourhood residents and in strengthening the social cohesion.



The district Assen-Oost is geographically isolated from the rest of Assen due to the railroad track. It is hypothesised that this physical isolation could increase the communal feeling of inhabitants. Hence, removing barriers and making the city more accessible should be balanced with creating distinct and different neighbourhoods that people can feel a part of.

Fig 39. Initiatives that build cohesive communities (Assen-Oo(G)St, n.d.; Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers, n.d.; Guit, 2025; Hof Van Rhee | Herenboerderij Assen, n.d.; Hof Van Rhee - Word Lid, n.d.; RTV Drenthe, 2025b; Wandelhalte, n.d.; modified).



A.

VOLUNTEERING

Herenboerderij Hof van Rhee is a small-scale farm in Rhee, nearby Assen. They operate with a focus on nature and aim for a healthy soil, a good life for animals and more biodiversity.

Walking stop to meet people who would like to walk together.

Studenten brengen weer leven in de Amstelflat: project met jaar verlengd

Students mixing with elderly to combat loneliness.

MIXING OF AGE GROUPS

Assen zet stap naar stedelijk jongeren-centrum in voormalig ING-pand

Youth centre in old banking office. A place where young people can meet and can develop their talents.

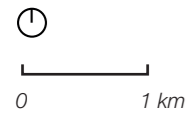
Vrijwilligerswerk in bejaardentehuis Arendstate.

Home for elderly in the city centre, within the commotion of everyday life. Different generations live in close proximity to each other and look out for one another.

EMBRACE
INITIATIVES THAT BUILD COHESIVE COMMUNITIES



Fig 4o. Existing palaces (Booms, 2009; "Boschhuisje" Op Het Landgoed De Eerste Steen, n.d.; De Koning, 2000; Het Gymnasium, n.d.; Pelinckhuis, n.d.; Ronn, 2015; Ronn, 2020; Stichting Marketing Drenthe, n.d.; modified).



CITY OF PALACES

De concentration of administrative and judicial power strengthened the attractiveness of Assen as a living place for the notables. Assen became a 'City of Palaces' ('Stad der Paleizen') in which noblemen built beautiful homes still visible today. To feel connected with Assen and its history, it is important that these places remain part of the city.

EMBRACE
EXISTING "PALACES"

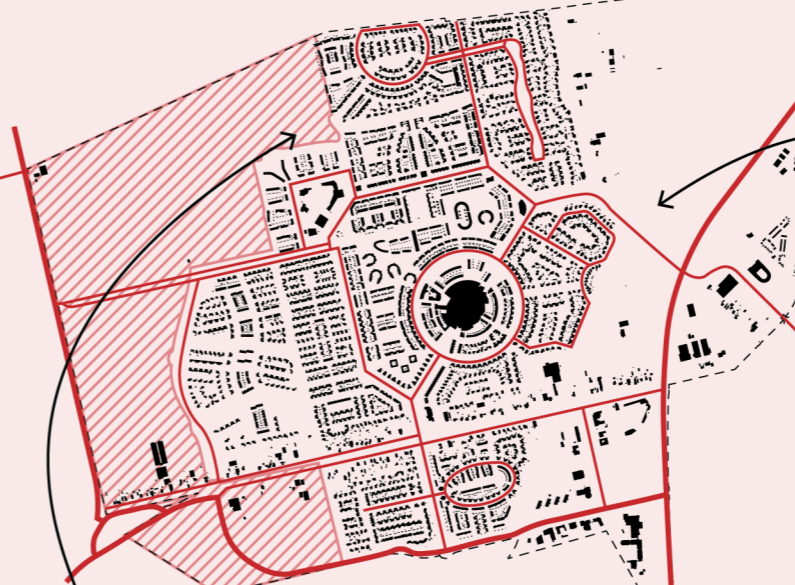
DEMOLISHING CULTURAL HERITAGE



Mercurius theater in Assen ligt voor-
goed in puin



De Kolk in Assen tegen de grond



REMOVING AMBIGUOUS SPACES

The neighbourhood Kloosterveen is expanding into the west direction, meaning green area gets transformed into built-up space. This is an irreversible act. Natural, ambiguous spaces, such as this forest in which children can play, have to make way for new single-family houses. These non-overly designed spaces stimulate creativity and allow children of different ages to explore together. Understandably, there was a protest from the youth against the closing of this natural playground.

Kloosterveen teleurgesteld: speelbos en natuurspeelplaats toch weg voor huizen

Margriet Benak 14 juni 2019, 18:14 • Aangepast 20 december 2021, 20:24 • 2 minuten leestijd



Het speelbos in Kloosterveen in Assen, dat op den duur verdwijnt (Berchtner)



Kinderen in Assen voeren actie voor behoud van hun speelbos

127 kinderkoninkjes hebben Bernad (8) en Wout (13) in Assen nog ingesmeerd. Ze willen dat hun speelbos en natuurspeelplaats aan die kant van de Asser wijk Kloosterveen blijven bestaan. Maar ingevolge de bestemming van het speelbos...



RISK OF UNEQUAL ACCESS TO PLAYING FACILITIES

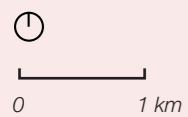
The new BOSS-policy stands for Moving, Meeting, Playing, and Sporting. It focuses on creating a hierarchy of public places. New investment in central locations comes with the consequence that smaller neighbourhood places disappear. Their disappearance allows funding to become available for the larger initiatives. It is important that this initiative does not result in small playgrounds accessible around the corner disappear, as these are especially relevant for small children.



Bewoners maken speel- en ontmoetingsplek in het Juniperusplantsoen

Some neighbourhoods have the means to develop their own playing facilities. However, this is not the case for other neighbourhoods. It raises the question of whether this is fair or not.

Fig 41. Demolishing meaningful places (Benak, 2018; Benak, 2019a; Benak, 2019b; Bewoners Maken Speel- En Ontmoetingsplek in Het Juniperusplantsoen, 2024; Drents Archief, n.d.; Gemeente Assen et al., 2026; Koning, 2009; Ontwerp En Inrichting Speeltuin Kloosterveen, n.d.; PDOK, 2025; modified).



LET GO OF
DEMOLISHING MEANINGFUL PLACES

Planned Kloosterveen expansion

OVERSIZED ROADS

Section A-A'

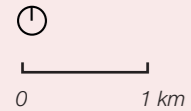


Fig 42. Social and physical barriers (CBS, 2024; Google, 2025; RIVM, 2024; RTV Drenthe, 2025a; modified).

Barrier between two neighbourhoods due to overdimensioned roads.

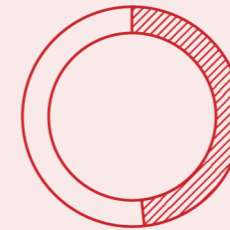
- ||| Barriers
- Fragmented neighbourhoods
- Main roads
- - Rail
- Built-up area

SLOWING DOWN TO CONNECT AND TO COMBAT:



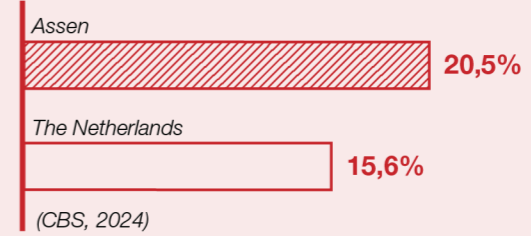
INSTITUTIONALISED INDIVIDUALISM

LONELINESS



48,2% of the citizens in Assen feels lonely. (Dutch average was 47,2% in 2024). (RIVM, 2024)

OBESITY



LET GO OF SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL BARRIERS



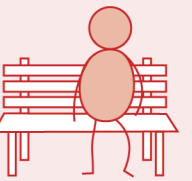
Europaweg

'Rotondeman' Sieb de Boer krijgt eigen bankje op zijn vaste plek in Assen

26 september 2025, 14:46 • 2 minuten leestijd



Elke dag tussen 4 en half 6 zit hij bij de rotonde om naar mensen te kijken



Biking, walking, and sitting increases the likelihood of meeting others.

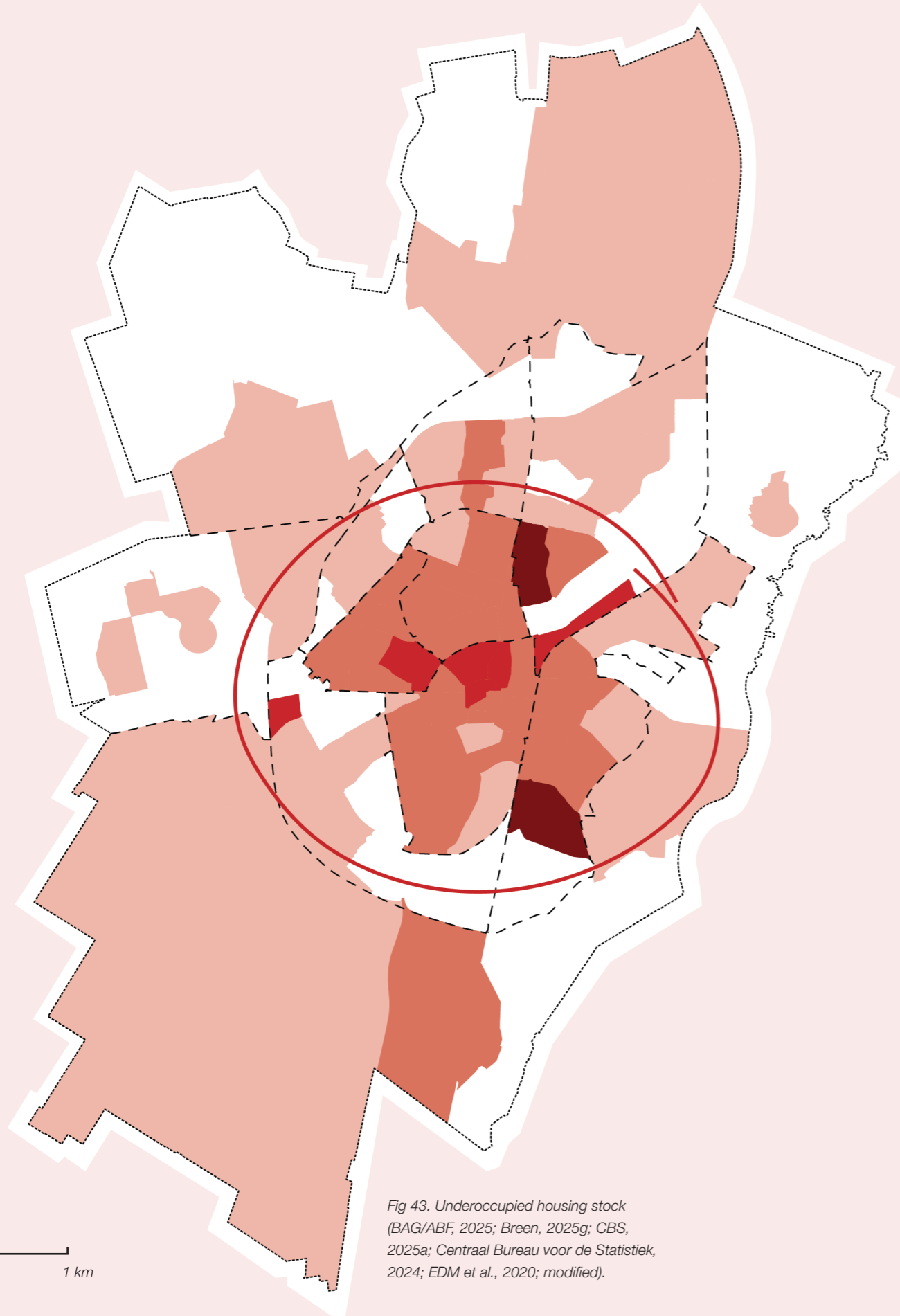
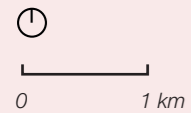


Fig 43. Underoccupied housing stock (BAG/ABF, 2025; Breen, 2025g; CBS, 2025a; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2024; EDM et al., 2020; modified).



size of household →
median living area →
category in which one lives comfortably →

Personen	1	2	3	4	5	6
Mediane oppervlakte	65	88	111	131	156	180
Categorie waarin men passend woont	33-67	76-100	100-120	120-144	144-168	168+

Bron: EDM, BAG 2020

(EDM et al., 2020)

2,1 people/household
= average household size in Assen

(CBS, 2025a)

median living area then becomes **90,3 m²**, while:

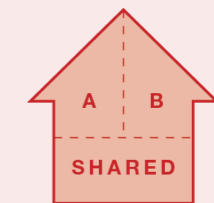
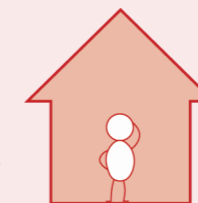
119 m²
= average size of housing stock in Assen

(BAG/ABF, 2025)

So, houses in Assen are on average about ~30% larger than the median needed size.

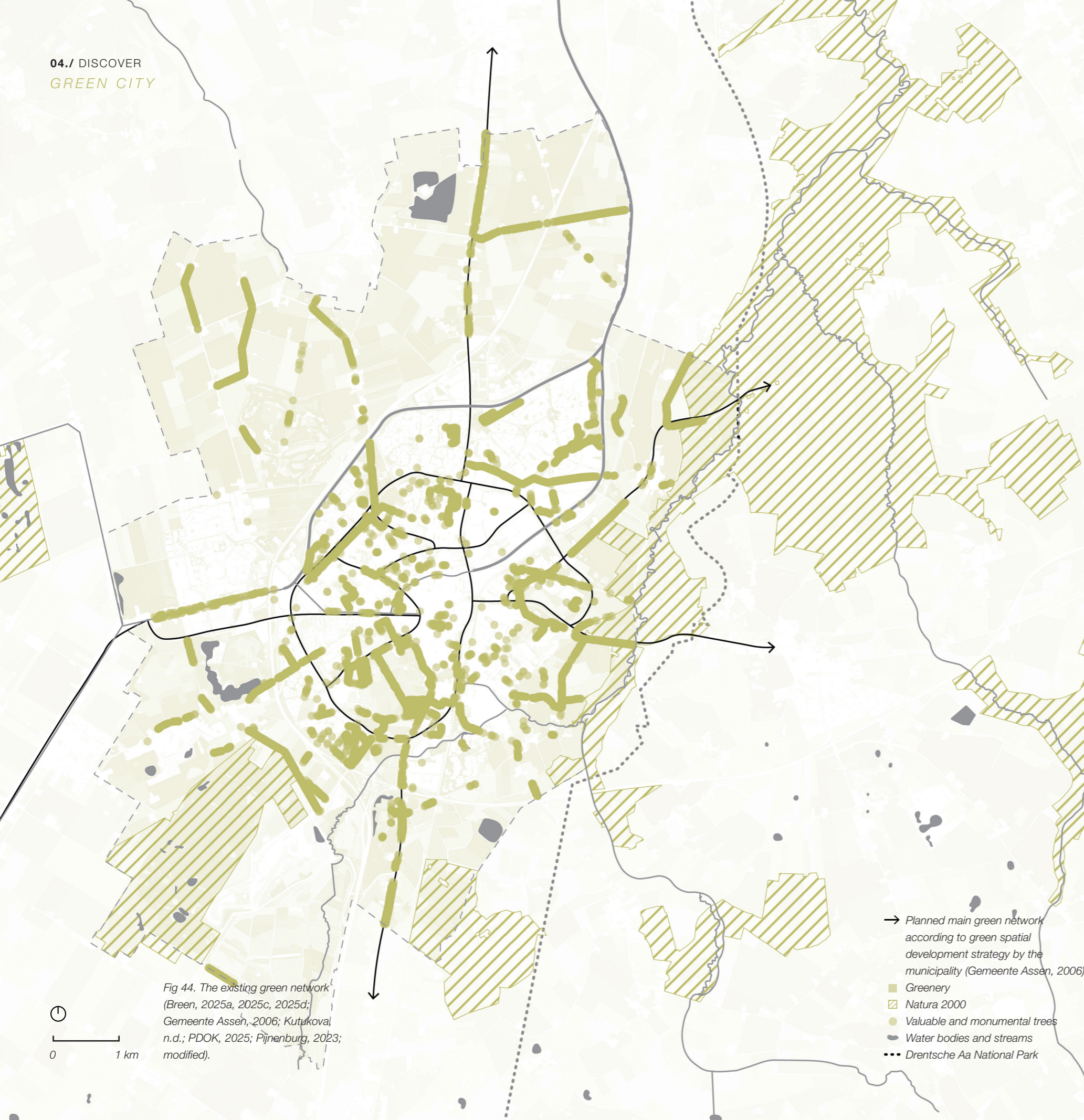


40,7% single-person households in Assen (Dutch average was 40,1% in 2025).
(CBS, 2025a)



- Percentage one-person households
- 80-100%
 - 60-80%
 - 40-60%
 - 20-40%
 - 0-20%

LET GO OF
UNDEROCCUPIED HOUSING STOCK

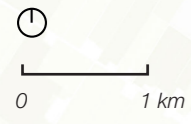


**OVER 59%
GREEN**

Assen was assigned the greenest city in the Netherlands by the organizers of the Green City Challenge (2022 edition) (Pijnenburg, 2023). 62% of this green is public green, which means more than 165 m² per inhabitant (Pijnenburg, 2023). This gives the city an uniquely green character. Additionally, the city is surrounded by protected Natura 2000 areas, and located directly next to the Drentsche Aa National Park.



Fig 44. The existing green network (Breen, 2025a, 2025c, 2025d; Gemeente Assen, 2006; Kutukoval n.d.; PDOK, 2025; Pijnenburg, 2023; modified).



- Planned main green network according to green spatial development strategy by the municipality (Gemeente Assen, 2006)
- Greenery
- ▨ Natura 2000
- Valuable and monumental trees
- Water bodies and streams
- ⋯ Drentsche Aa National Park

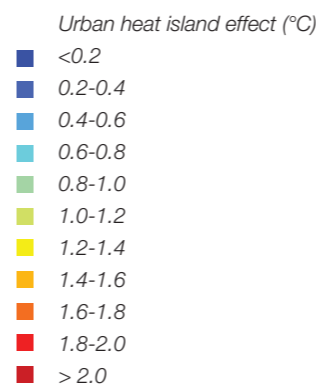
**EMBRACE
THE EXISTING GREEN NETWORK**



URBAN HEAT ISLAND EFFECT

One can see the cooling effect of the green character of Assen and its surrounding.

Fig 45. The cooling effect of greenery
(Atlas Natuurlijk Kapitaal, 2016;
modified).



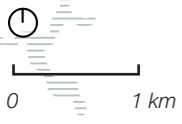
Green in the city acting as perfect heat regulators. In the case of deciduous trees, they provide shade in the summer and cool the air through evapotranspiration. In the winter, the trees can let the sun through to allow natural heating.



**EMBRACE
THE COOLING EFFECT OF
GREENERY**



Fig 46. Stream valleys, "essen," and heath fields (Provincie Drenthe, 2004, 2024; Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, 2017; modified).



- Stream valleys (beken)
- "Essen"
- Built-up "essen"
- Heath fields (heidevelden)

EMBRACE
STREAM VALLEYS, "ESSEN,"
AND HEATH FIELDS



The province has assigned multiple areas in which silence is guaranteed for the benefit of humans and animals (Geheugen van Drenthe, n.d.). In these zones, the noise level is allowed to be a maximum of 40 decibels. It signals that nature get priority and human activity is subordinate to the natural environment. The Environmental Management act (Wet milieubeheer) or the Noise Nuisance Act (Wet geluidhinder) are in place to protect the quiet zones (Geheugen van Drenthe, n.d.-b).

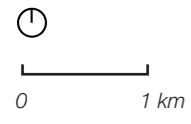
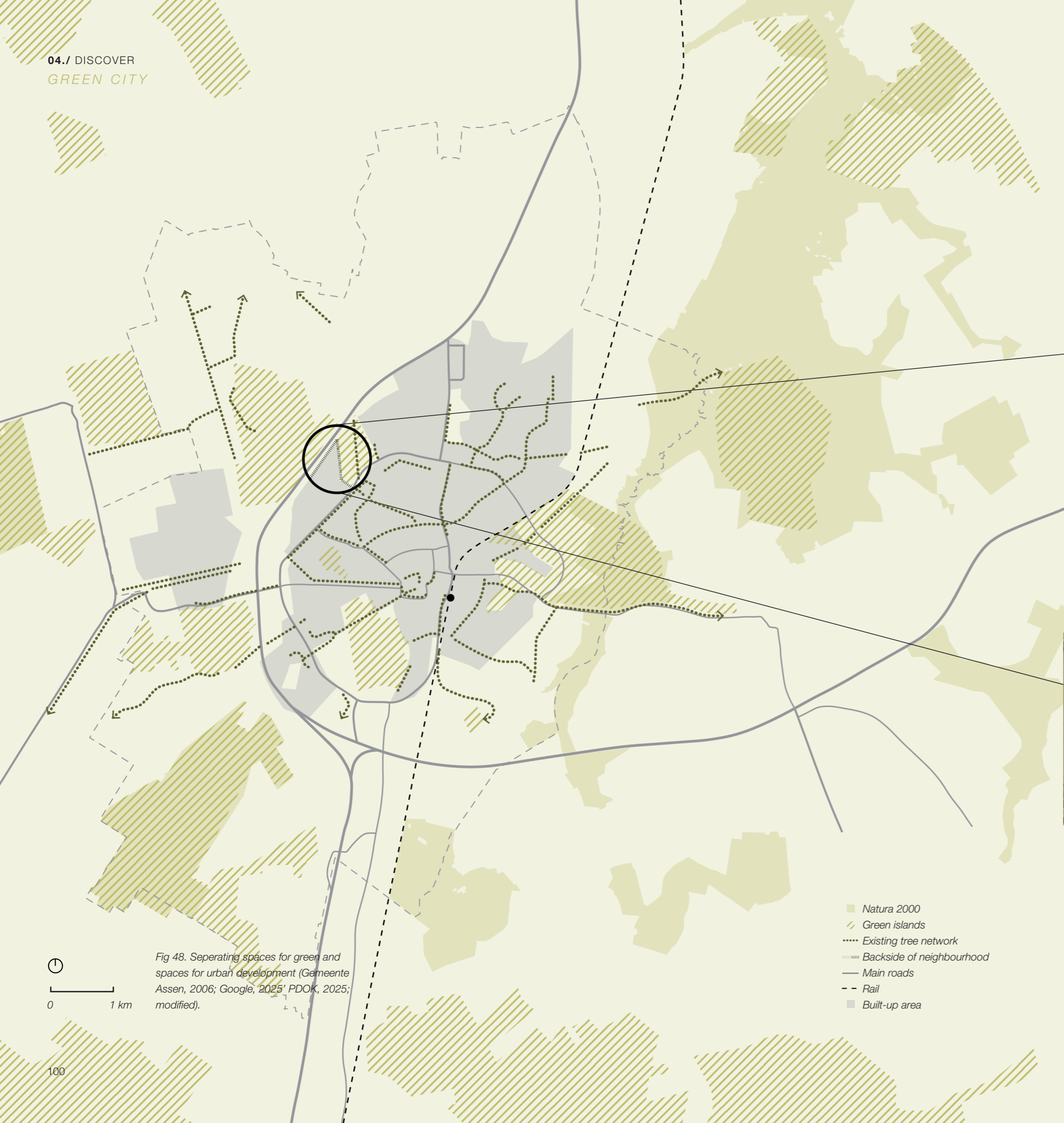


Fig 47. Quietness (Bracke & De Bruijn, n.d.; Geheugen van Drenthe, n.d.-b; Interprovinciaal Overleg, 2025; Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, n.d.; modified).

Quiet zones



EMBRACE
QUIETNESS



Transition between neighbourhood and surrounding green is abrupt. Neighbourhood is inward oriented with its backside towards the green surrounding. Green areas located nearby but poorly accessible due to infrastructural barriers (roads, rail, etc.) or poorly connected through lack of intuitive routing.

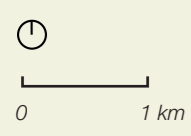
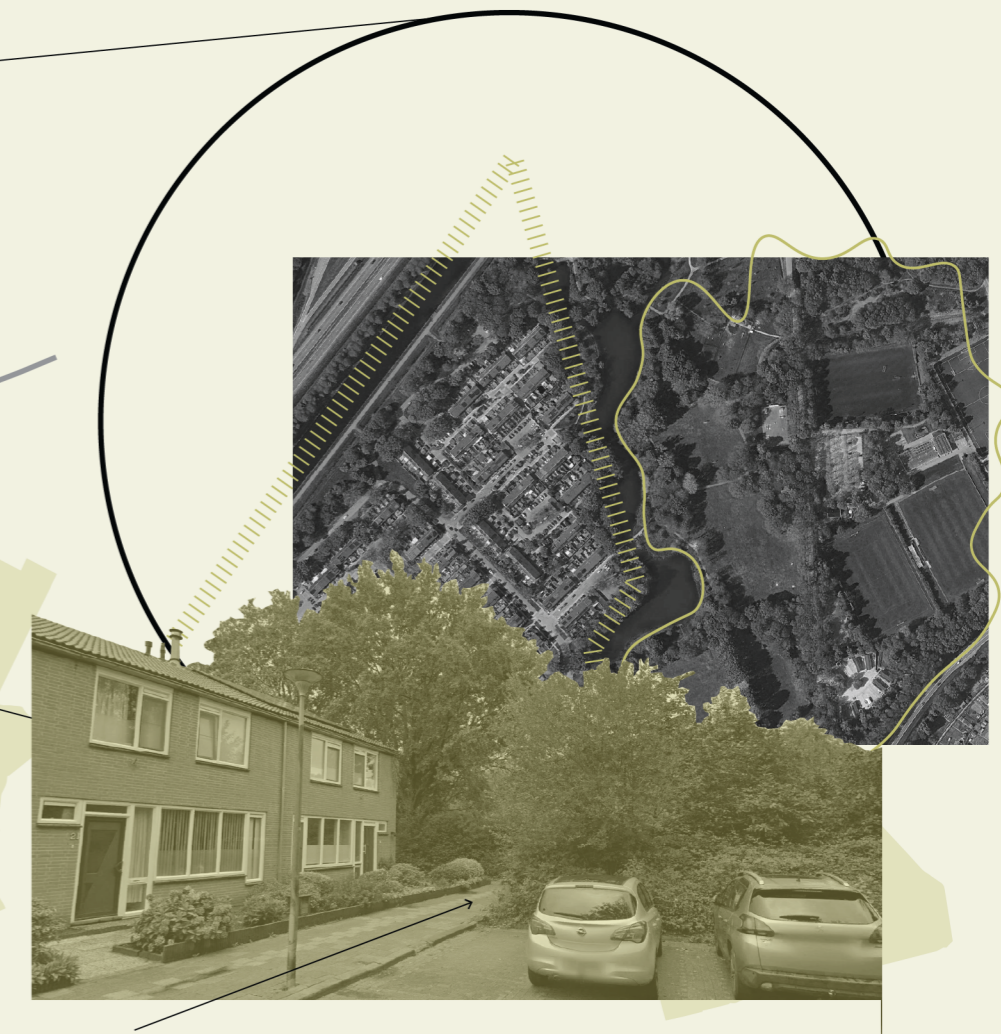
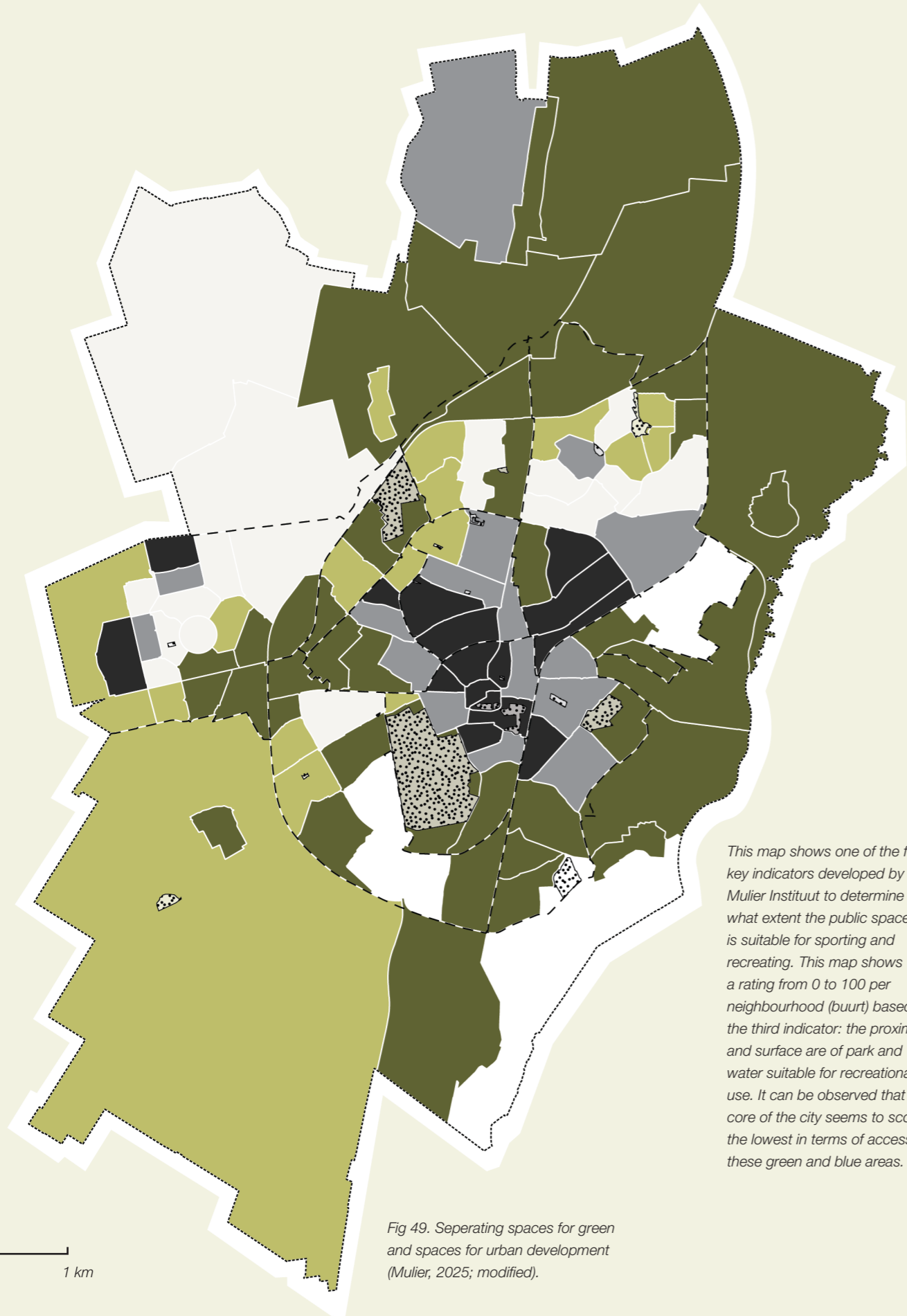


Fig 48. Separating spaces for green and spaces for urban development (Gemeente Assen, 2006; Google, 2025; PDOK, 2025; modified).

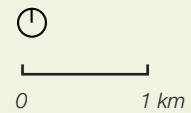
- Natura 2000
- ▨ Green islands
- ⋯ Existing tree network
- ▨ Backside of neighbourhood
- Main roads
- - Rail
- Built-up area

LET GO OF
**SEPERATING GREEN
AND URBAN PLACES**



This map shows one of the four key indicators developed by Mulier Instituut to determine to what extent the public spaces is suitable for sporting and recreating. This map shows a rating from 0 to 100 per neighbourhood (buurt) based on the third indicator: the proximity and surface are of park and water suitable for recreational use. It can be observed that the core of the city seems to score the lowest in terms of access to these green and blue areas.

Fig 49. Separating spaces for green and spaces for urban development (Mulier, 2025; modified).



Proximity and surface area of parks and water for recreational purposes (score 1 to 100, data from Mulier, 2025):

- Score >87
 - Score 78.8-87
 - Score 70,2-78.8
 - Score 52.2-70,2
 - Score < 52.2
- (percentile calculations were used to develop 5 score categories)*

■ Parks

LET GO OF
GREY CITY CORES

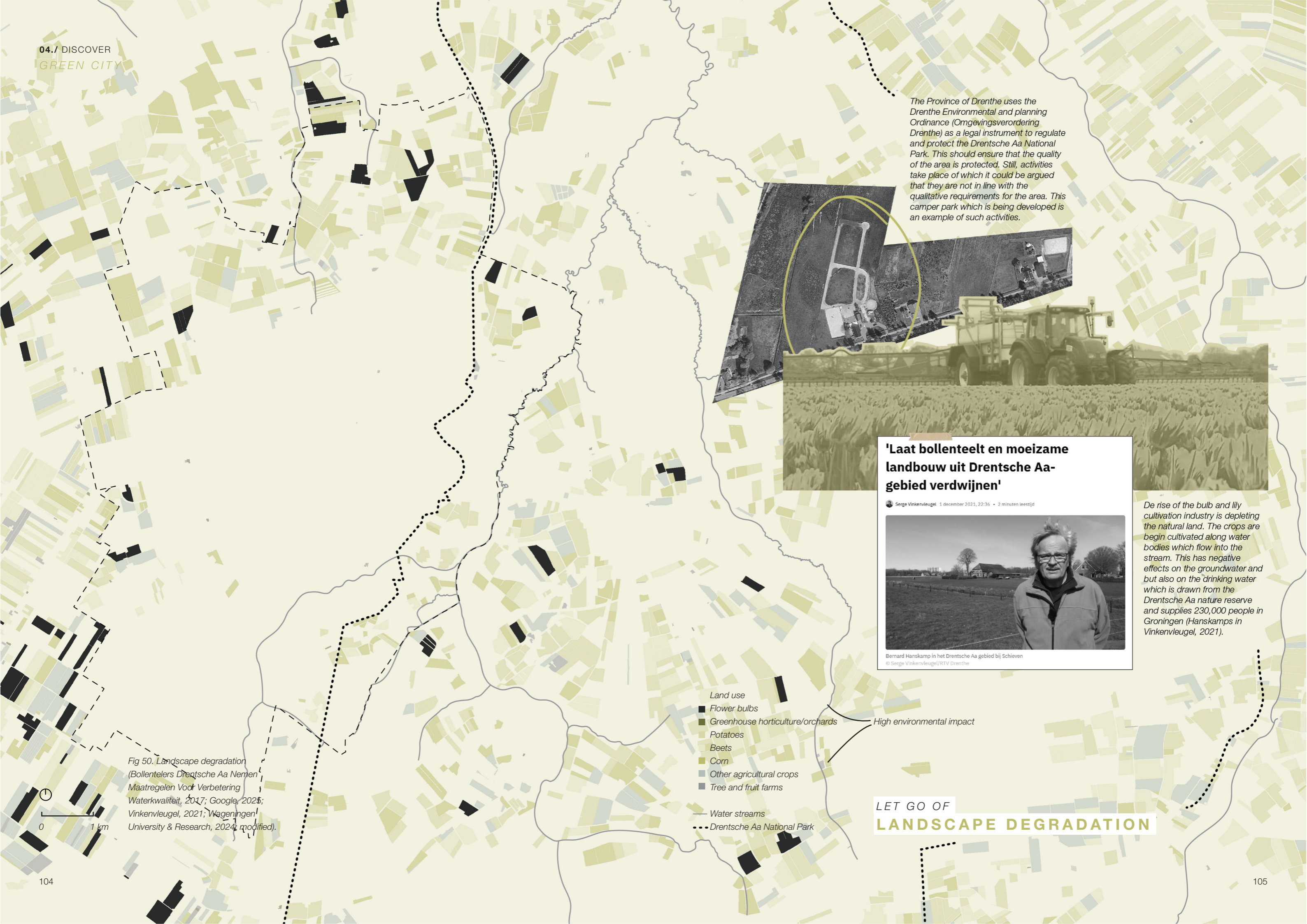


Fig 50. Landscape degradation (Bollentelers Drentsche Aa Nemen Maatregelen Voor Verbetering Waterkwaliteit, 2017; Google, 2025; Vinkenvleugel, 2021; Wageningen University & Research, 2024, modified).

The Province of Drenthe uses the Drenthe Environmental and planning Ordinance (Omgevingsverordening Drenthe) as a legal instrument to regulate and protect the Drentsche Aa National Park. This should ensure that the quality of the area is protected. Still, activities take place of which it could be argued that they are not in line with the qualitative requirements for the area. This camper park which is being developed is an example of such activities.



'Laat bollenteelt en moeizame landbouw uit Drentsche Aa-gebied verdwijnen'

Serge Vinkenvleugel 1 december 2021, 22:36 • 2 minuten leestijd



Bernard Hanskamp in het Drentsche Aa gebied bij Schieven © Serge Vinkenvleugel/RTV Drenthe

De rise of the bulb and lily cultivation industry is depleting the natural land. The crops are begin cultivated along water bodies which flow into the stream. This has negative effects on the groundwater and but also on the drinking water which is drawn from the Drentsche Aa nature reserve and supplies 230,000 people in Groningen (Hanskamps in Vinkenvleugel, 2021).

High environmental impact

LET GO OF
LANDSCAPE DEGRADATION

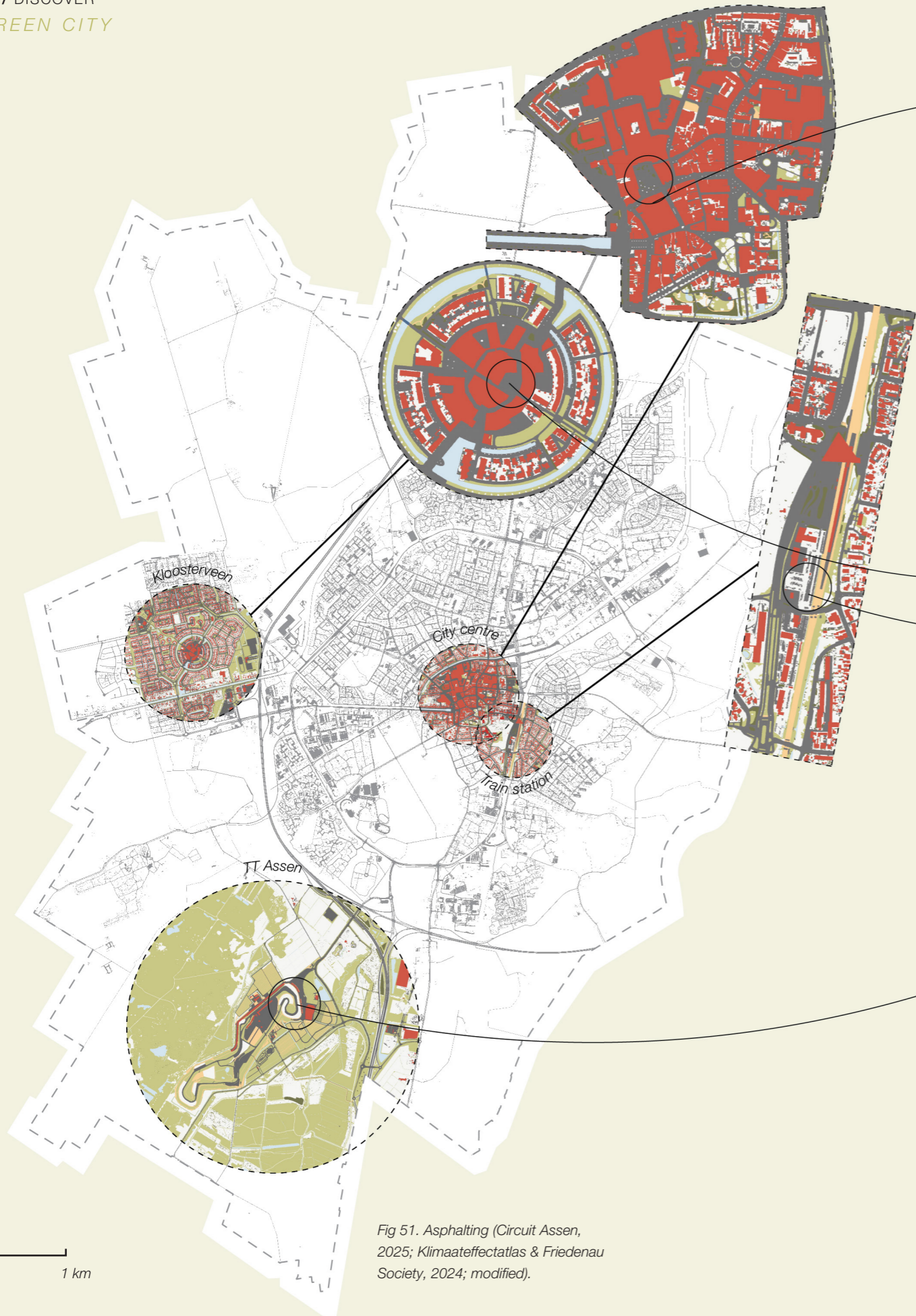
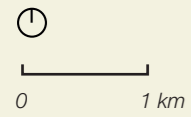
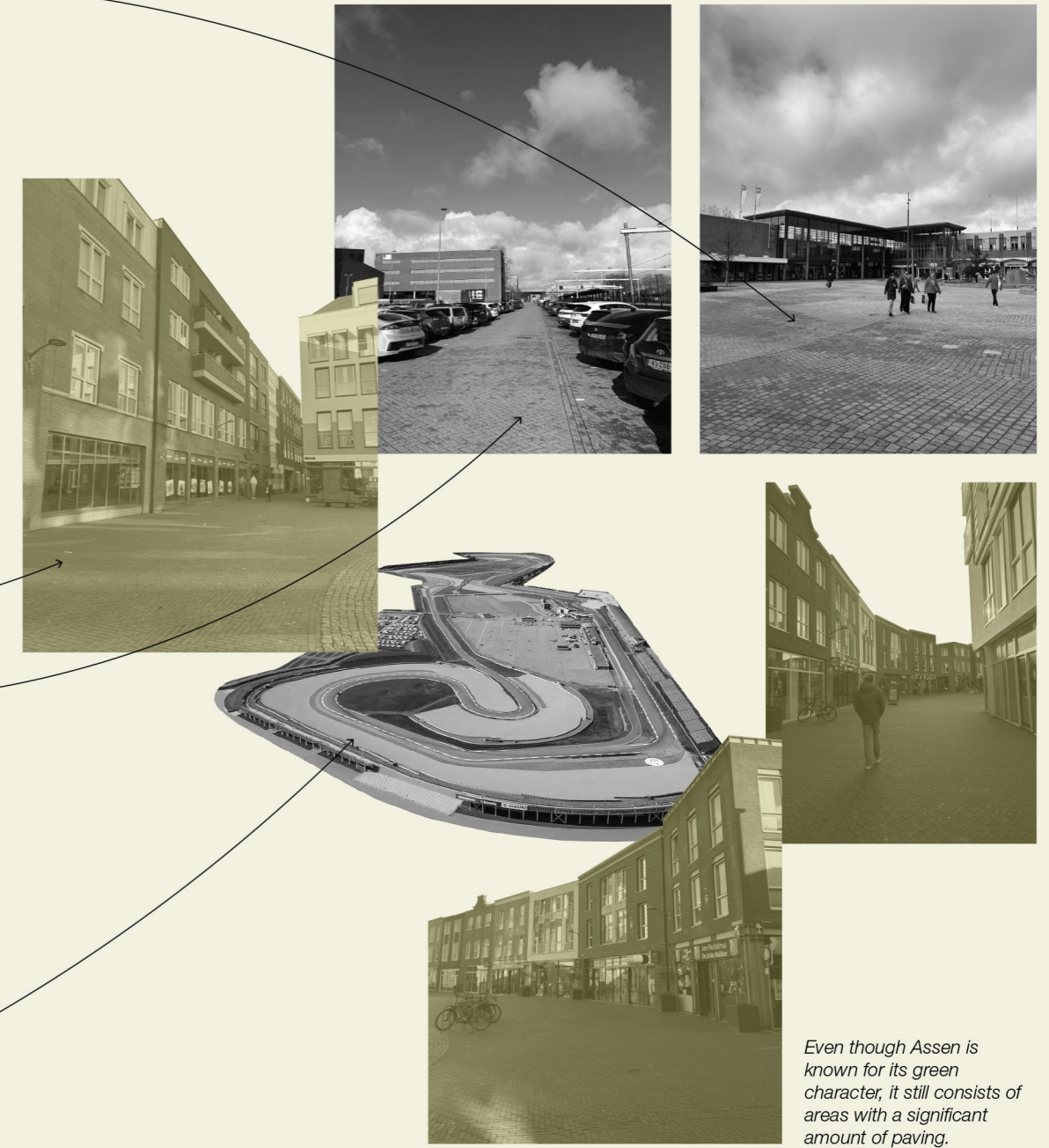


Fig 51. Asphaltting (Circuit Assen, 2025; Klimateffectatlas & Friedenau Society, 2024; modified).

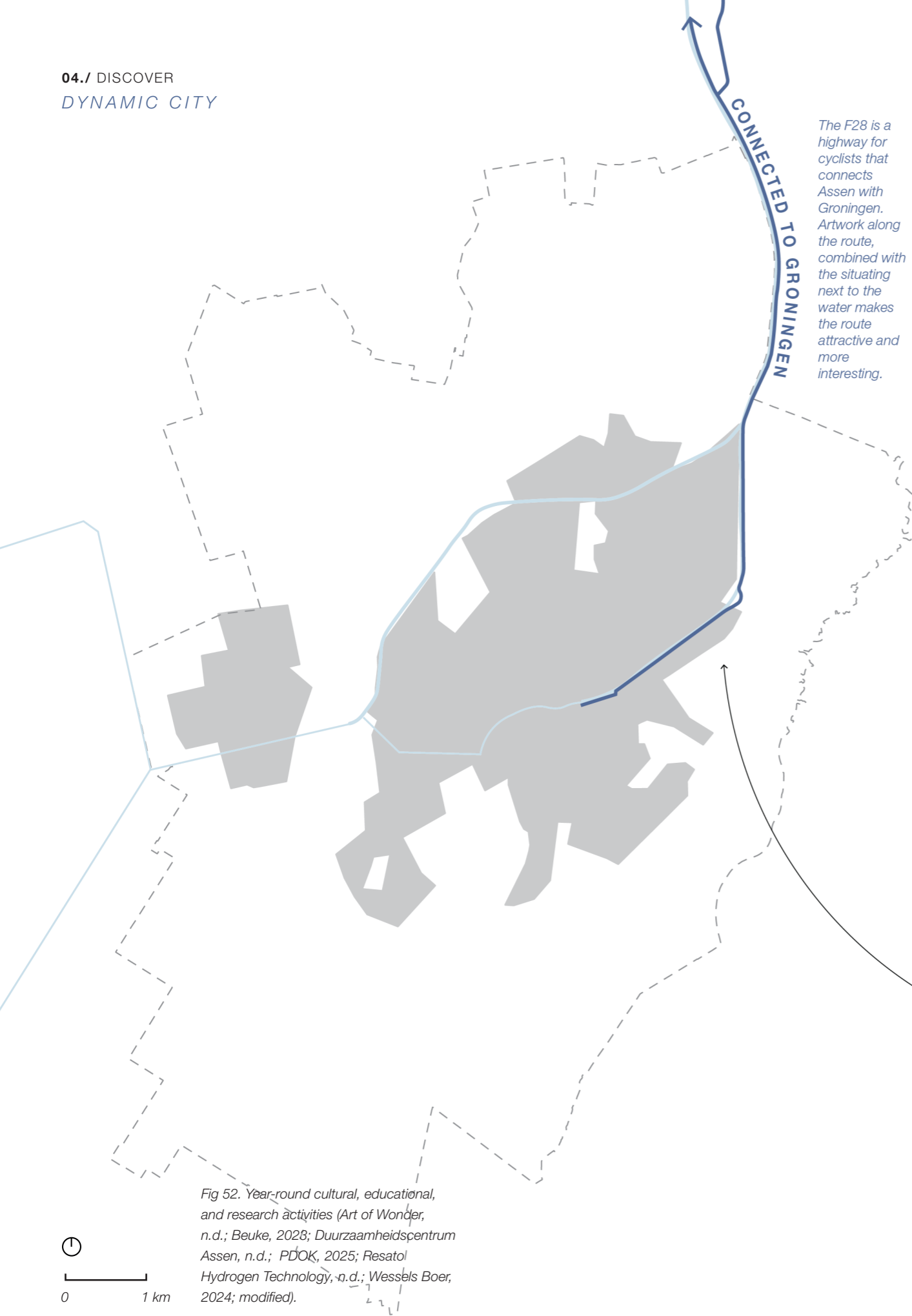


- Land cover:
- Water
 - Unpaved
 - Semi-paved
 - Paved
 - Grass
 - Unpaved with bushes
 - Building
 - Bridge over water



Even though Assen is known for its green character, it still consists of areas with a significant amount of paving.

LET GO OF
ASPHALTING



CONNECTED TO GRONINGEN

The F28 is a highway for cyclists that connects Assen with Groningen. Artwork along the route, combined with the situating next to the water makes the route attractive and more interesting.

Fig 52. Year-round cultural, educational, and research activities (Art of Wonder, n.d.; Beuke, 2023; Duurzaamheidscentrum Assen, n.d.; PDOK, 2025; Resato! Hydrogen Technology, n.d.; Wessels Boer, 2024; modified).



Street Art Festival in Assen, adding colour to the city.



The Sustainability Centre in Assen works on creating awareness among adults and children about sustainability themes. Information is brought in a playful and engaging manner.



Art of Wonder festival is a youth theatre festival that stimulates creativity and imagination.

Fietssnelweg Assen-Groningen krijgt vier kunstwerken

12 februari 2024, 18:43 • 1 minuut leestijd



Schetsontwerp van het nieuwe kunstwerk © Marjet Wessels Boer

Resato Hydrogen Technology is based in Assen and works on developing sustainable hydrogen infrastructure.

**EMBRACE
YEAR-ROUND CULTURAL,
EDUCATIONAL, AND RESEARCH
ACTIVITIES.**

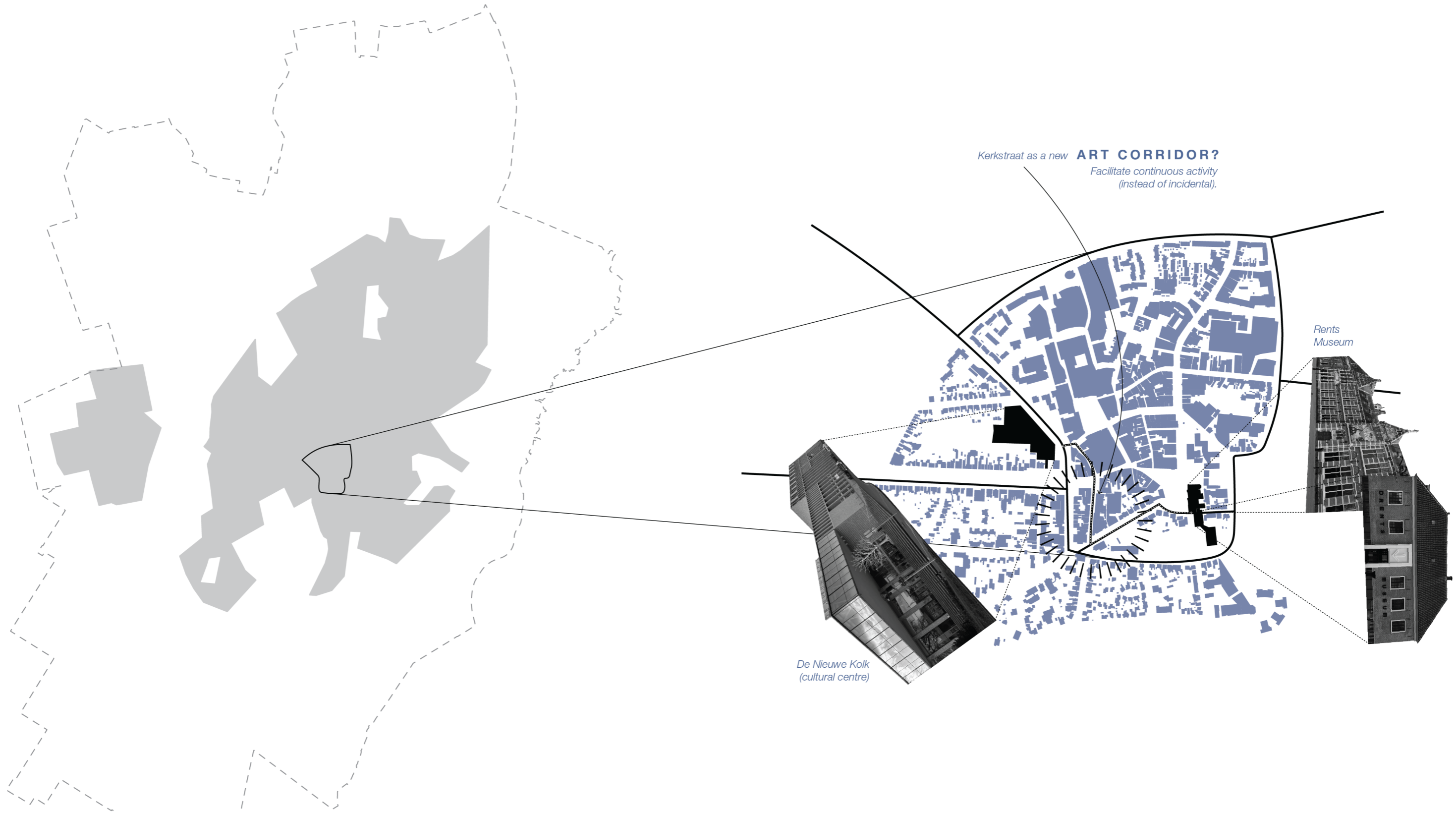
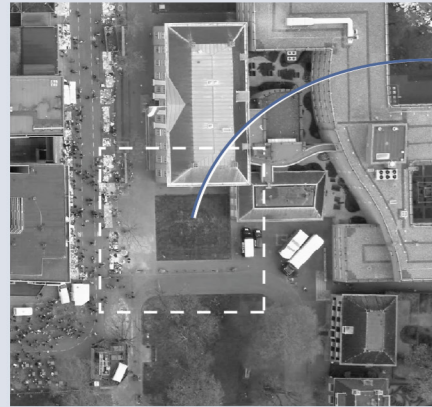
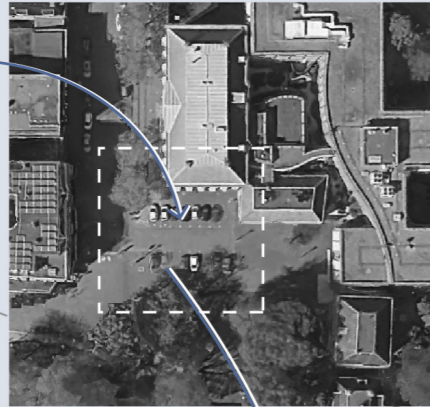


Fig 53. Creative industries
(PDOK, 2025; modified).



2014



2026

Green area situated next to the Brink in the centre of Assen (on the right side of the courthouse) is transformed into a parking spot. At the time, this was in conflict with the applicable zoning plan "Erfgoedkwartier" ("Heritage Quarter").

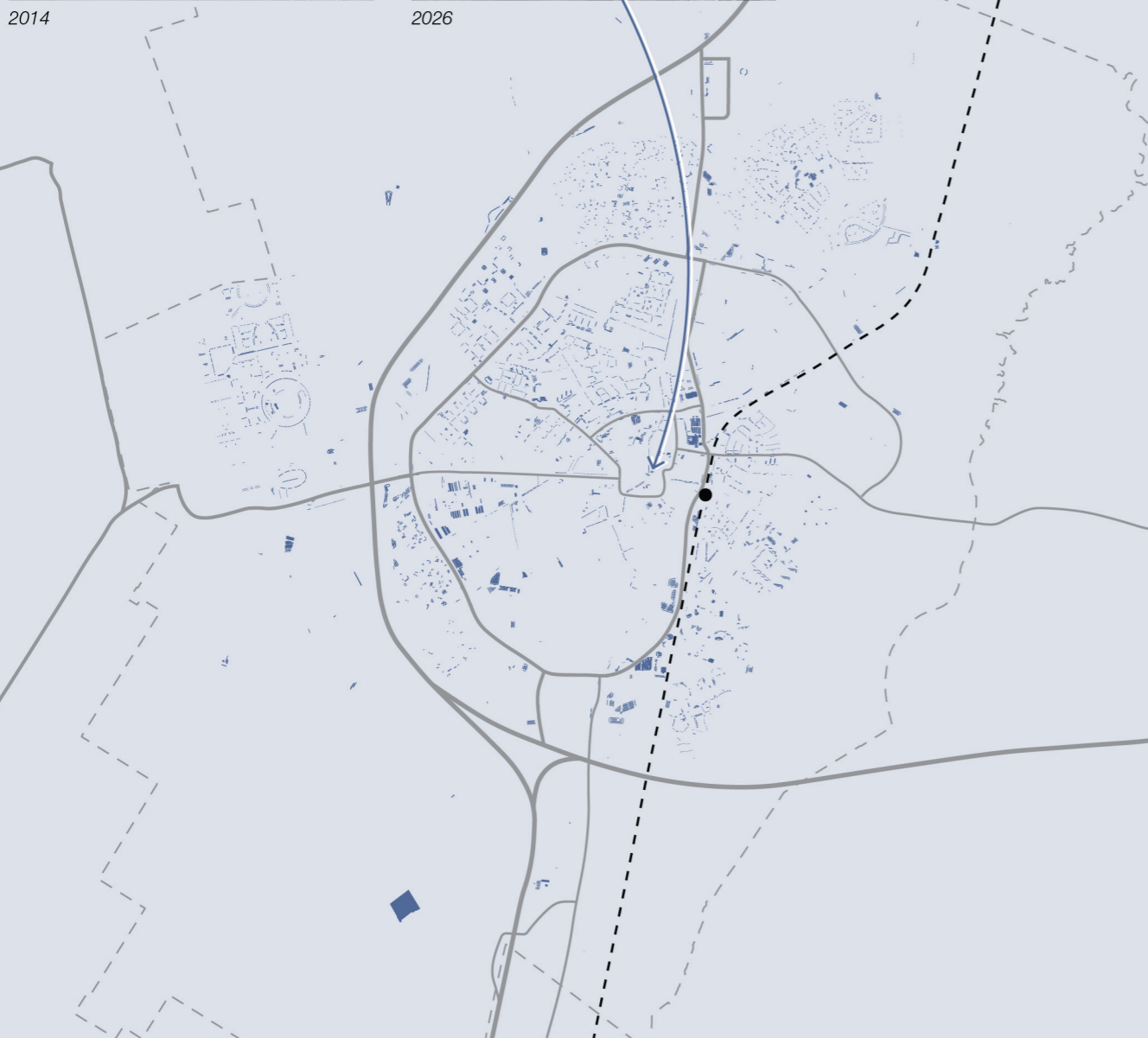
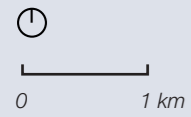


Fig 54. Prioritising cars
(Google, 2025; PDOK, 2025; Herinrichting De Brink: Ruimtelijke Onderbouwing, 2014; modified).



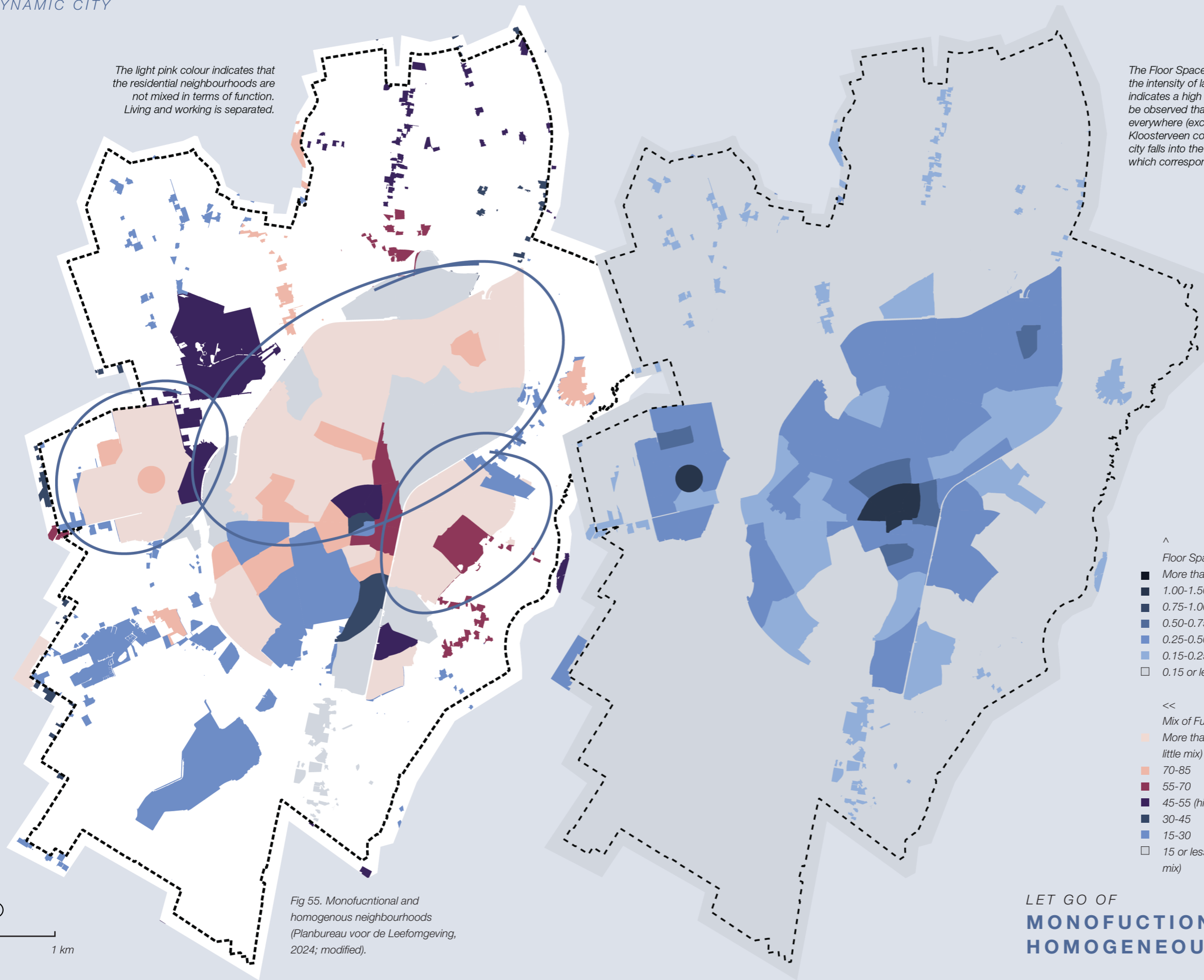
- Parking space
- Main roads
- - Rail

LET GO OF
PRIORITISING CARS



The light pink colour indicates that the residential neighbourhoods are not mixed in terms of function. Living and working is separated.

The Floor Space Index (FSI) gives an indication of the intensity of land usage. The darker colour indicates a high urban density. In Assen, it can be observed that the FSI is about the same everywhere (except for the city core and Kloosterveen core). The largest portion of the city falls into the FSI category of 0.25 to 0,5, which corresponds with a moderate density.

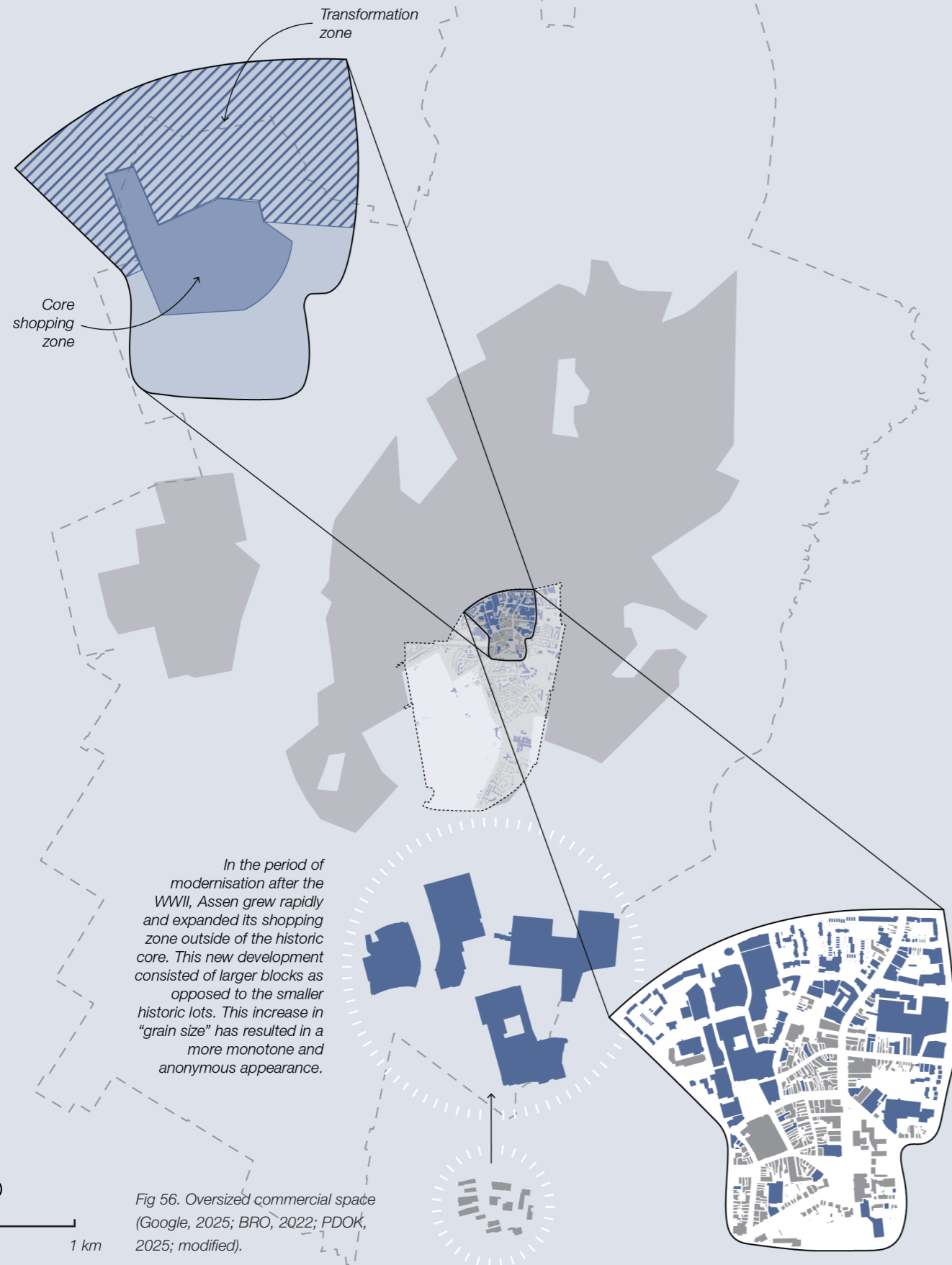


- ^
Floor Space Index (FSI):
- More than 1.5
 - 1.00-1.50
 - 0.75-1.00
 - 0.50-0.75
 - 0.25-0.50
 - 0.15-0.25
 - 0.15 or less
- <<
Mix of Functions (MXI):
- More than 85 (mainly housing, little mix)
 - 70-85
 - 55-70
 - 45-55 (high mix)
 - 30-45
 - 15-30
 - 15 or less (mainly working, little mix)

Fig 55. Monofunctional and homogenous neighbourhoods (Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving, 2024; modified).

LET GO OF
**MONOFUNCTIONAL AND
HOMOGENEOUS NEIGHBOURHOODS**

**DESIRE TO SHRINK AND
CONCENTRATE
COMMERCIAL
SPACE**

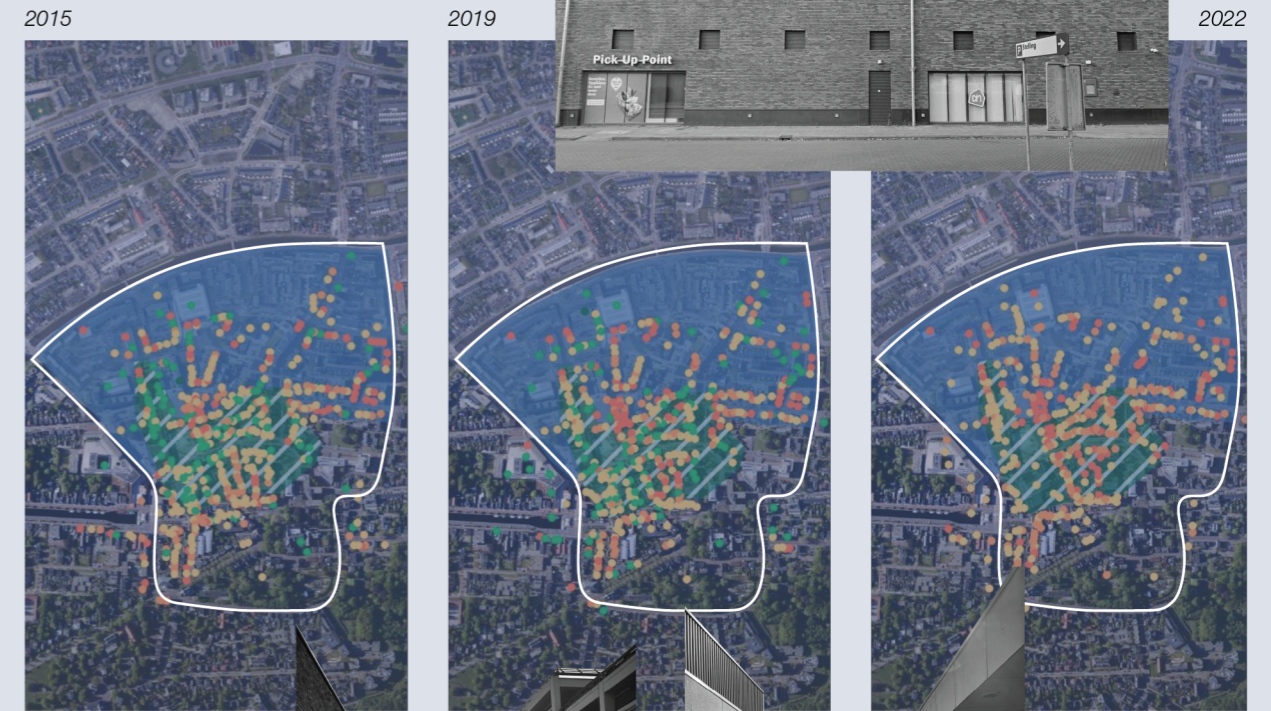


**BLIND
FAÇADES**



**RETAIL RISK
INDEX (RRI)**

The Retail Risk Index gives an indication of the likelihood of stores and shopping areas becoming vacant (red indicates the highest risk and green the lowest risk). It can be seen that the vacancy risk has increased significantly between 2015 and 2022. According to BRO (2022), areas with a lot of vacancy also tend to attract more vacancy.



(BRO, 2022)

- ^
- Retail Risk Index to show the risk of vacancy (BRO, 2022):
- Highest risk of vacancy
-
- Lowest risk of vacancy
- < To show difference in "grain size":
- Buildings built after 1970
- Buildings built before 1970
- Built-up area



The combination of vacant lots and backsides of large blocks causes undefined in-between spaces which are uncomfortable to walk through.

**LET GO OF
OVERSIZED COMMERCIAL SPACES**

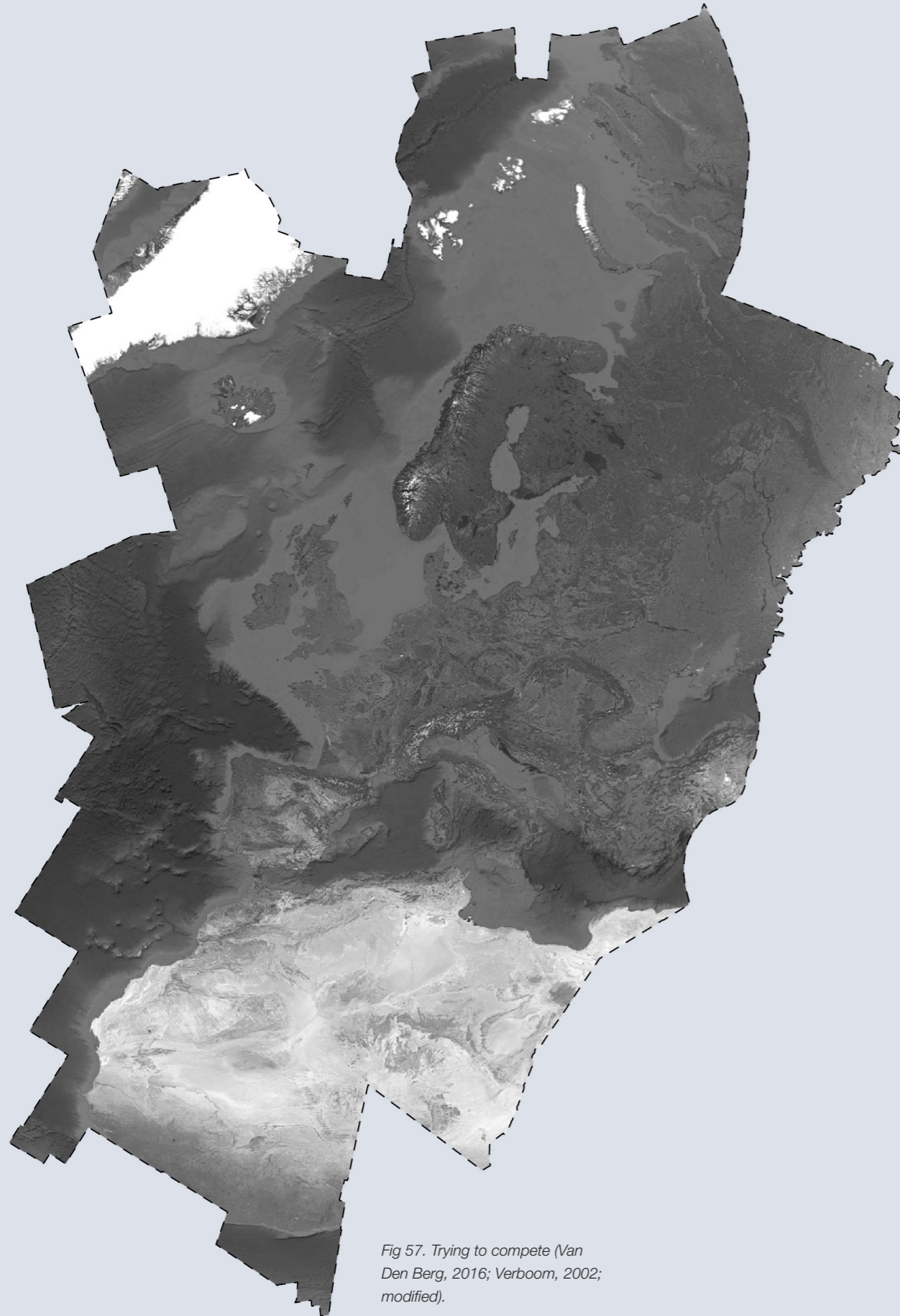


Fig 57. Trying to compete (Van Den Berg, 2016; Verboom, 2002; modified).

Assen uses the TT Assen to position and market itself but does it really suit Assen?



LANDMARKS & HIGH RISE

To create a more urban appearance.

Development with the ultimate goal to strengthen the city economically and become more interesting for investment.

Noordelijke provincies azen op Tesla-vestiging: 'Hi @elonmusk, we are Top Dutch!'

Elon Musk moet dinsdagavond vreemd op zijn telefoon gekeken hebben. Vanuit Harlingen tot Winschoten en vanuit Eemshaven tot Emmen werd de hoogste baas van Tesla plotseling massaal bestookt met tweets. 'Hi @TeslaMotors @elonmusk, we are Top Dutch!'



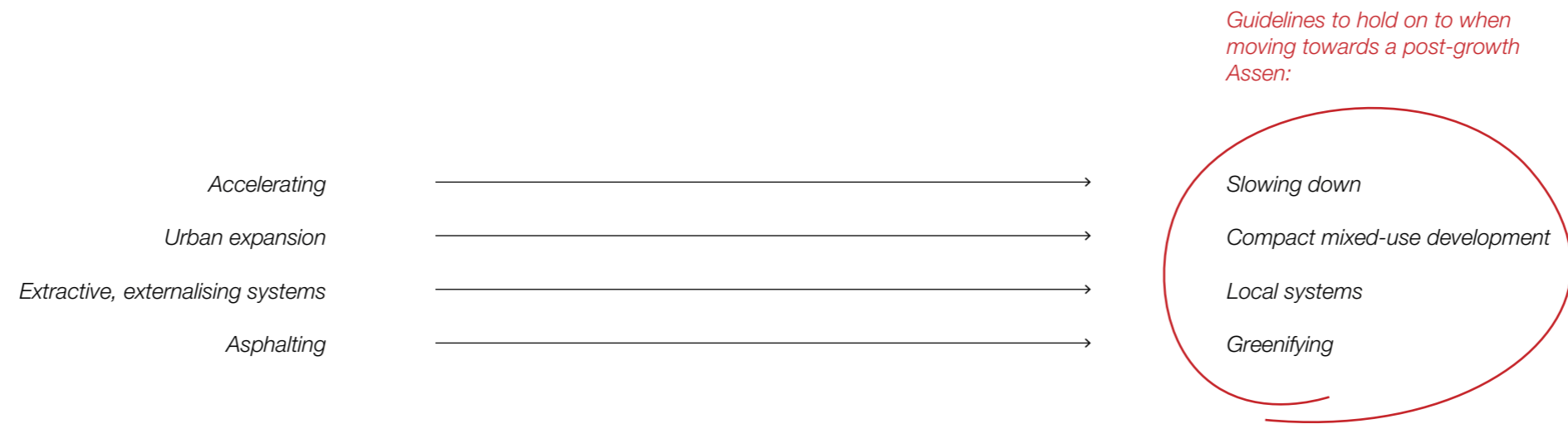
Tesla heeft al een fabriek in Nederland, in Tilburg. anp

Tesla factory in the northern provinces of the country?

Desire to compete with the Randstad?
(Verboom, 2003)



LET GO OF
TRYING TO COMPETE



The analysis of Assen has uncovered both its potential and its risks. To reach a post-growth state, one has to think about the long-term. The current growth paradigm is like an accelerating motor driven by the desire to economically grow, compete, and expand. If an alternative, post-growth future is desired in which planetary and human wellbeing is central, then alterations must be made while this motor is still turning, which takes time. On the way, it can be helpful to hold on to guidelines that help inform decisions and help keep Assen on track towards a resilient post-growth future. They also help to avoid making potential irreversible decisions that lock Assen into a growth-oriented trajectory. These guidelines are based on the discovered qualities of the city and are a call for Assen to dare to make decisions based on its own qualities. It provides a clear sense of direction that actually suits the city and its characteristics. After all, it has been discovered that a lot of post-growth potential is there already or has been there in the past. The following step, the dream, shows what could be the result if Assen actively appreciates its local qualities and makes decisions in favour of improving wellbeing.

Fig 58. Setting guidelines to hold on when moving towards a post-growth world.

05.

Dream & design

a post-growth Assen

AIM The travel guide to Assen acts like a dream of what could be when Assen decides to improve wellbeing and embraces its local (historic) qualities and shows concrete design interventions. This piece of speculative function is not intended to be science-fiction but, instead, aims to show that a post-growth future of the existing city is both possible and desirable. It designs with what is there already and remembers, subtracts, adapts, and adds elements to improve quality.

Considering that the journey towards a post-growth future will require some time, the travel guide is set in 2076. This date allows the fictional authors of the guide to have actively experienced the transition that took place in the city. They can explain to the readers what decisions have been made and what has been the result because of it. Hence, the authors of the guide are a group of retired active residents. They are considered active because they have actively been a part of reshaping the city. After all, the designed future imagines that the transition has taken place because of an uprising of locals. Concerned locals got together to form a citizen movement with the motto “Van Groei Naar Bloei” (or in English: “From Growth To Flourish”). The timeline accompanying the travel guide shows that a combination of different events has led to their uprising. There was growth policy by the municipality and national government (including the Ontwerp Nota Ruimte) on one side and environmental disasters and social and physical disconnectedness on the other side. Both sides clashed with each other. Citizens united themselves and used a bottom-up approach to transform Assen to make it healthier, more resilient, and more pleasant to live in. Eventually their work convinced policy makers, leading to an Assen that that is committed to the flourishing of their citizens and of the natural environment. The authors of the travel guide proudly tell the story of how Assen has become this attractive city. The guide even assumes that Assen has become an example to many other Dutch cities. The people eager to learn about the story of Assen are the fictional readers of the travel guide in 2076.

To readers now, the format of the travel guide aims to show that change can start through local initiatives. Possibly, people reading it can be inspired and motivated to work together and actively take part in transforming the city. Hence, the intended audience today is primarily residents of Assen, as the story is about their city. For both, the fictional readers in the future visiting Assen from other Dutch cities and the residents of Assen reading it today, it makes sense to have the travel guide in Dutch. It makes the story accessible.

The travel guide on itself also makes the application of post-growth theory accessible to people in and outside of Assen. It shows and tells the reader what it is like to live in a city that has transformed with wellbeing as a guiding motivation. Besides showing the spatial consequences, the format of a travel guide allows one to talk about non-physical aspects, such as behaviour and lifestyles of residents. It takes the reader through the city to experience it on eye level and be emerged in it. It bridges the gap between abstract post-growth theory and real-life consequences. It allows people to actually imagine what life could be like. The post-growth thinking is applied throughout the city, from its representative centre to its intimate neighbourhood to show that post-growth spatial development goes beyond individual small-scale initiatives.



Fig 59. Travel guide.

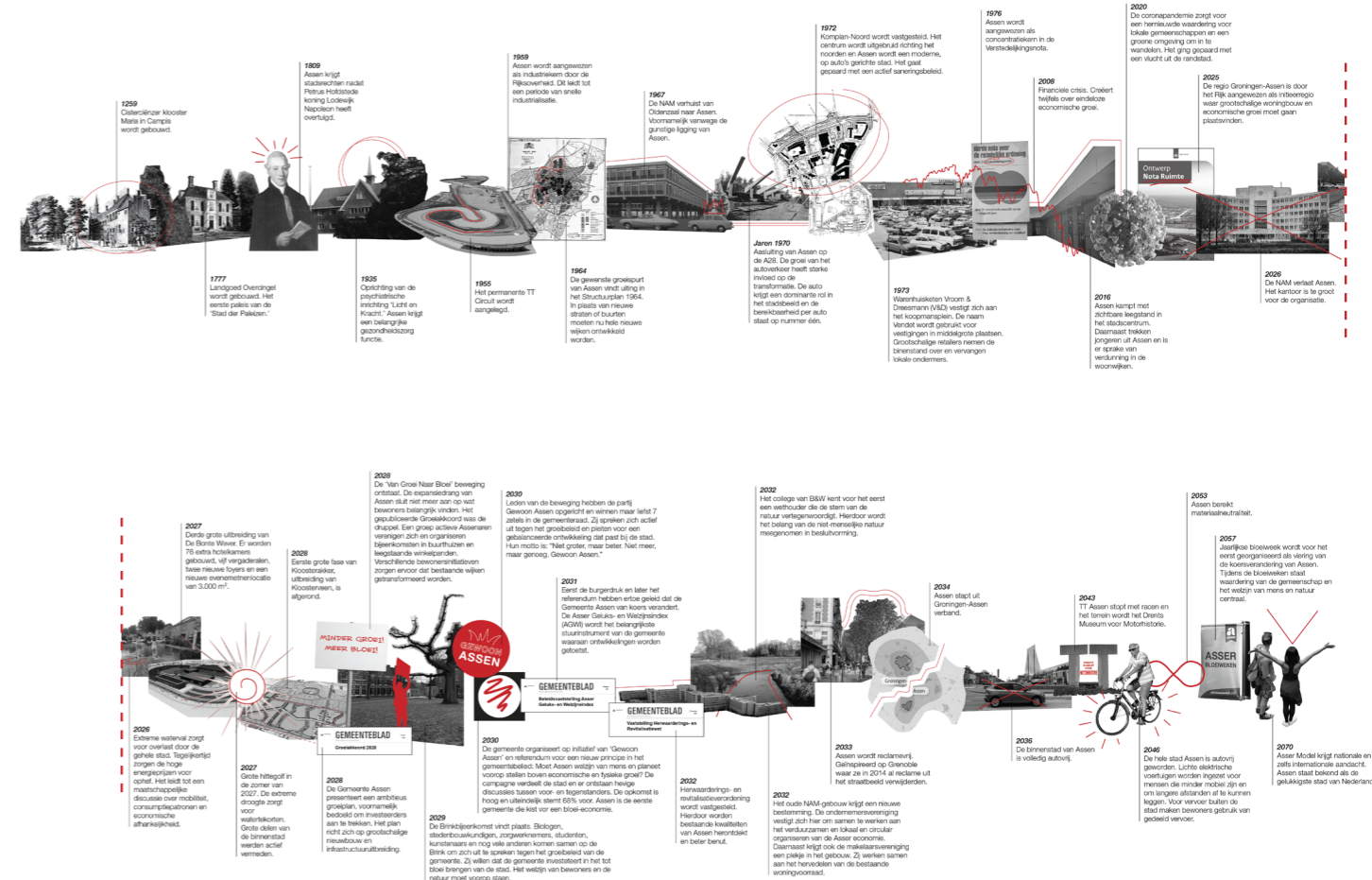


Fig 60. Party fictional timeline as part of the travel guide to show a pathway to a post-growth Assen (see Travel Guide references).



^ Fig 61. Lookout point from Peelo neighbourhood to see the high flats from Assen, symbolising the city's expansion outwards.

< Fig 62. Map of travel guide with a route that allows people to discover what a post-growth Assen could be like.

CONTENT

The travel guide consists of two routes. The guide is in the form of a physical book, which should be taken along the route. One route goes through the city centre and the other goes through the Peelo neighbourhood. This is because the life of a resident of Assen occurs on the urban scale, as well as on the neighbourhood scale. The centre route is deemed important because it has a representative function. It shows how Assen has shifted from wanting to compete and attract more and more businesses to Assen being a place in which citizens can create, relax, and develop themselves. The Peelo neighbourhood is chosen because it is a typical neighbourhood that has been developed all at once around end 1970s, during the growth spurt of Assen. Its “cauliflower” layout and its related green infrastructure contain qualities which can be used and enhanced. At the same time, aspects of the neighbourhood risk becoming outdated when they are being ignored. The route shows how locals have embraced and revitalised the local qualities of their neighbourhood through small-scale interventions. Together, they have a big impact and make the neighbourhoods lively and socially cohesive. Both routes have been tested first-hand (the centre route with Hans Snijders) and contain different stops which show interventions that are centred around the act of remembering, subtracting, adapting and adding.

Remember

Both routes begin at the origin of the places. They start with explaining how the city of Assen and the former village of Peelo came to be. This historic perspective is important because it was found that some historic qualities have been lost during the expansion-oriented journey of Assen. Peelo used to be a typical Drenthe village in which communal spaces, neighbourliness (or Naoberschap), and living with nature were key. These are qualities that align with post-growth values. In the case of the city of Assen, the city's origin starts with the relocation of the Cistercian nunnery Maria in Campis. They developed a cultivated forest meant for timber harvesting (Vereniging van Vrienden Asserbos, n.d.). This history fits with slowing down and developing a circular and local economy, again aligning with post-growth values. Later, Assen was a small city in a vast green surrounding with qualitative estates and gardens. It stayed this way for a long time. This history legitimises design choices. Overly paved and car-dominated areas can be transformed to green oases in which natural systems can thrive, and people can recreate or relax. Assen becoming a city of gardens again does not seem so radical considering that the city was originally set up in a similar way.

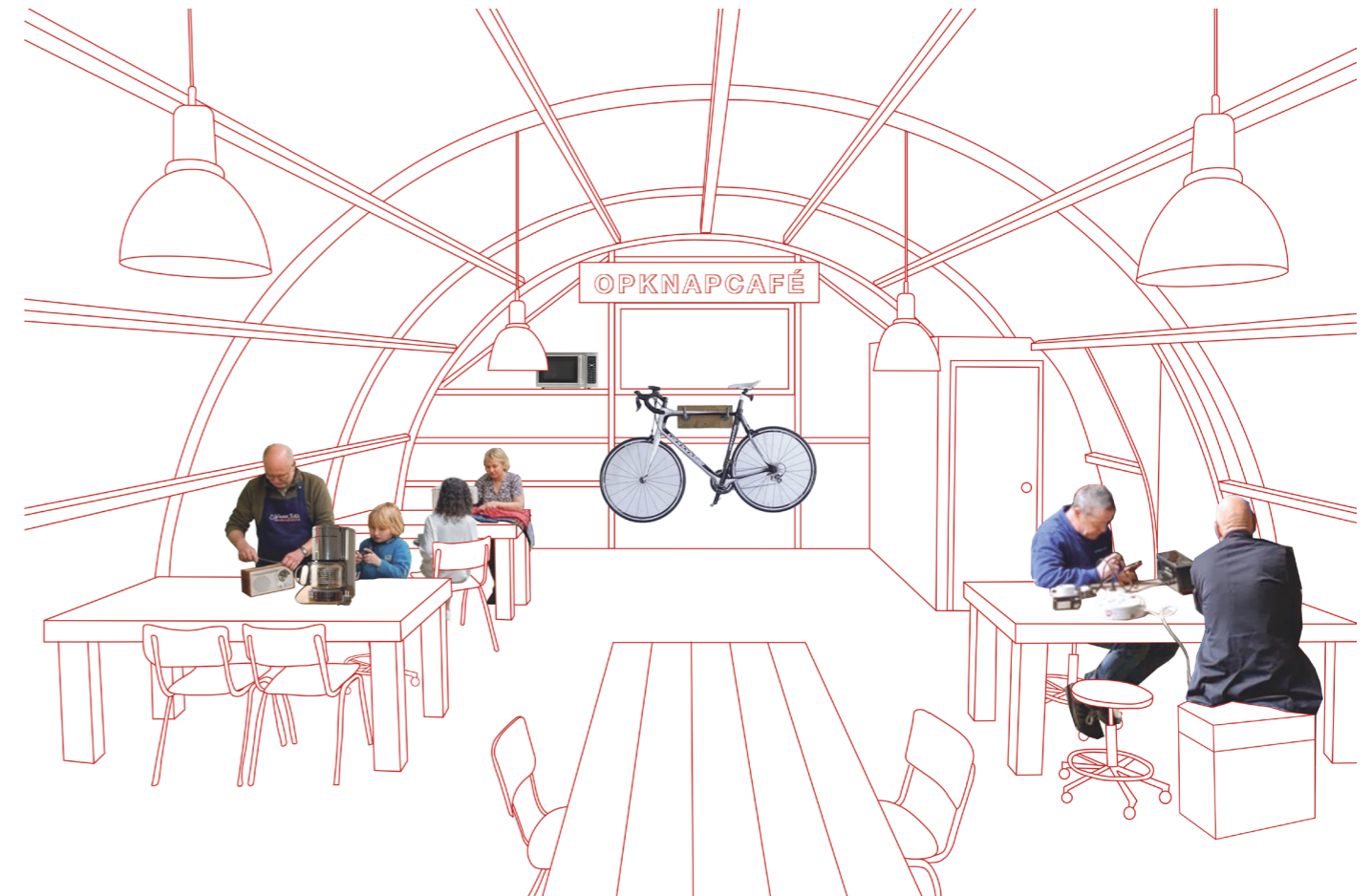
Rather than using at this historical perspective nostalgically, it is seen as something we can learn from today and get inspiration from. To make spatial decisions that fit with the city's identity.

Subtract In terms of content, there are also deliberately things left out. The car is no longer part of the urban fabric, commercial space is diminished, Groningen is not mentioned and the digital domain is only used to inform and connect residents of a neighbourhood. These decisions align with the guiding principles of slowing down life and having a more local-oriented focus. The future of the digital domain proved to be especially difficult to imagine, even when discussing it with Hans Snijders (2026). This is because of the rapid rate at which it has and still is developing. At the same time, concerns are raised about the phone taking over our public spaces. In his essay called 'De straat als huiskamer' (or 'The street as living room') Jos van der Lans talks about how using the phone used to be something that was contained to a phone booth but no longer is (Van Der Lans, 2004). Considering that his essay was written back in 2004, it is safe to say that this trend has intensified. Looking around in public area, it can be observed that people are constantly staring at their mobile devices. Furthermore, work has become increasingly digital. In a conversation with Hans, we discussed that an increasingly digital world could result in an increased desire for spaces that give us a qualitative break from this digital world (Snijders, 2026). There might be a longing for spaces that allow one to have contact with the physical surroundings, to feel the sun, meet others and be with nature. Hence, this is why the travel guide focuses on how these kinds of spaces have been developed.

As mentioned, Groningen is not referred to in the travel guide. This is partly because a post-growth Assen focuses on localising economic chains but also because it frees Assen from constantly feeling the need to compete. The city has learned to appreciate its own strengths and no longer builds high-rises or industrial terrains in order to compete with surrounding cities.

Adapt Many of the stops of the travel guide show how existing spaces have been transformed in favour of improving wellbeing. Growth in this case is not about expanding and building entire new neighbourhoods but is about improving and making better use of what is there already. The adaptations have health as a constant underlying motive. This fits with a concern raised during interviews about the expected increasing pressure on our healthcare system. Hence, preventive healthcare seems a wise solution. This is applied throughout Assen by stimulating slow modes of transport (walking and cycling), creating spaces in which people can exercise and play sports, and focusing on growing healthy food in communal gardens or at sustainable farming cooperatives (Herenboerderijen). Furthermore, the travel guide shows that mental wellbeing of citizens is prioritised by highlighting those spaces that connect residents. The community centre, schools, and cultural spaces play a central role. Finally, spaces are also adapted to prioritise the wellbeing of ecological systems by giving back paved areas to nature. This way water, plants and insects are part of the city and are allowed to thrive.

The travel guide also shows how adaptation of building blocks allows the city itself to become more adaptable. Reducing the grain size of the buildings to smaller parcels like it used to be in the past, reduces the risks of entire building blocks becoming obsolete all at once when circumstances change.



Add The travel guide also shows elements that are added to the city. These additions are mostly based on inspiring cases mentioned in literature, which have been applied to the case of Assen. The design investigations of BURA and Crimson Historians and Urbanists (2024), as well as Platform Woonopage and International New Town Institute (2025) were particularly inspiring. Facilities are added that stimulate sharing and repairing, such as tool libraries and repair cafes. Furthermore, different types of housing typologies are added to the previously homogenous housing stock. This is a combination of adding and adapting, as it is done through splitting housing, sharing spaces or building on top, next or behind existing housing. It allows people to move within their neighbourhoods into houses that fit with their needs at that moment in live. It helps resolve the issue of under occupation of the current housing stock. Hence, a shift is made from focusing on having enough houses to focusing on having enough people in neighbourhoods to ensure there is enough support for facilities.

Fig 63. Example of a communal space added to Peelo: a repair café (see Travel Guide references).

STYLE Overall, the style of the travel guide is consistent with the intended purpose. It is simplistic and not flashy, as it aims to educate people, not sell them something. The drawing style of the guide shows that it has been made “by hand.” It is not a picture-realistic image but rather a creative interpretation of reality. It is assumed that in the future, this signs of human-made products are valued more because of how easy artificial intelligence has made it develop realistically looking images. Many of the drawings are building upon existing photographs. The images are adapted and new layers are added. This aligns with the design approach taken for the city itself: further building upon what is there. There are some photographs included that show how the place used to be. They are in black and white to indicate that these are “old” photographs. Furthermore, the tone of the travel guide aims to engage the reader and convince them that the story is taking place in 2076. Dates of important fictional events and names of fictional key figures are, therefore, included. Finally, the travel guide consists of details that refer to the local identity. The name of the publishing house is, for instance, Campis Press, referring to the Maria in Campis nunnery. The Crocus flowers on the front and back of the travel guide suit with the Assen culture, as they can be seen in abundance when visiting the city during spring (especially around Landgoed Overcingel). Additionally, they refer to the flourishing of the city.

Fig 64.
Koopmanssquare transformed
into Koopmansgarden.
The drawing style builds upon
the existing, just like design
interventions (see Travel Guide
references).



06.

Destiny

towards change

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSEN

The destiny phase of the appreciative inquiry model focuses on how we get to the desired future. This actually aligns with the original research question of *how can the spatial application of post-growth theory foster an alternative sustainable future for the city of Assen?*

The original research question was raised because of a felt discomfort about the nationally imposed ambition to make Assen an initiate-region. Looking back at its history, it was found that a similar role had been appointed to Assen in the past. In an attempt to spread out growth better across the country, the national government appointed Assen to become an industrial growth centre in 1959 and later in 1976, again as part of the Third Nota Ruimte (Battjes & Brink, 2009; Hosper landschapsarchitectuur et al., 2011). It has led to a rapid urban expansion, reshaping the city through larger-scale infrastructure, an increase in building grain size, new industrial areas and the development of entire new neighbourhoods. I questioned, however, whether continuing to grow in terms of quantity is the best way to contribute to the qualitative improvement of the city. I hypothesized that aiming for a post-growth alternative future would not only be needed due to the limits to growth raised by the Club of Rome (Meadows et al., 1972) but might also better fit with the local identity of Assen.

On one hand I am, therefore, critical of the current growth paradigm that exists in Assen. On the other hand, however, I'm also appreciative of the city and its qualities. This has guided my analysis and design process. Through the appreciative approach (The Center For Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.), I discovered qualities of Assen that align with the desired post-growth alternative. In the end, I believe this makes the proposed future for Assen one that suits the city, increasing the chances of the change actually happening. Hence, to answer the research question of how the spatial application of post-growth theory can foster an alternative sustainable future for Assen, I think it starts by appreciating and understanding where the city comes from and which qualities make up its unique fingerprint. As the travel guide suggests, it then also requires both active citizens and a willing municipality that continuously make spatial decisions that embrace existing qualities that align with post-growth thinking. This means that the health and wellbeing of people and nature should be put first. It requires enabling locals to shape their city collectively in such a way that spaces are created in which humans as well as ecological systems can thrive. Creating spaces that invite people to slow down and reconnect locally, that strengthen green and local networks and are built within the existing urban fabrics instead of beyond them. Over time, it is relevant to hold on to these guidelines so that the overarching goals remain clear.

The speculative travel guide creates a “mobilizing ‘frame of opportunity’” that inspires and empowers readers to collectively work towards revitalising Assen (Hajer & Pelzer, 2018, p. 226). A clear image of what could be, so a post-growth future becomes one that is worth fighting for. Based on the conversations held, I believe there are citizens and professionals in Assen who are willing to do so. Combined with the discovered abundance of post-growth potential, I think Assen can actually achieve the dream of becoming a city that allows people as well as nature to flourish.



BEYOND ASSEN

The method applied to Assen can be relevant for other cities as well, especially other middle-sized cities. The Netherlands consists of many of these similarly sized cities. In fact, according to Goudappel, 60 municipalities fall in the mid-size category, meaning they have between 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants (Goudappel, n.d.). Like Assen, these cities might struggle with what it means to operate somewhere in between a small- and large-scale city. Considering the current demographic trends, it is unlikely that these cities can all grow. Hence, the methodology applied to Assen might then act as an inspiration for other cities of what to do otherwise. When talking to Hans Snijders, he compared the approach taken to understand Assen to going into therapy (Snijders, 2026). In therapy, you investigate where you come from and hopefully end up (re)discovering yourself and embracing your personal qualities. This is exactly what was done in this thesis. This therapy approach is something that could help other cities like Assen as well, encouraging them to develop based on their own strengths. It reduces the risk of all places becoming exactly the same.

The speculative guide shows that post-growth urban development on the scale of the city is actually possible. It bridges the gap between theoretical post-growth ambitions and spatial application. In her work, Xue (2022) mentions the failure of degrowth to “engage in transformation from an urban/urban regional lens.” In the case of post-growth theory, I found that the spatial application is often times either highly theoretical or consists of fragmented experiments. My research and the resulting travel guide show that the consistent application of wellbeing-oriented thinking throughout the city can lead to the reshaping of the city as a whole, establishing post-growth development as the norm.

Fig 65. A local communal green space (buurtbrink), which prioritises human and ecological wellbeing (see Travel Guide references).

PERSONAL REFLECTION

This thesis started with the personal belief that we must stop with growth-obsessed spatial planning. Through reading post-growth literature (Hickel, 2020; Schenderling, 2022), I became more and more convinced that our expansive system is reaching a limit and that we must shift our focus towards what I believe truly matters: human and planetary wellbeing. I was intrigued by how this personal view seemed to misalign with aspects of the latest Nota Ruimte. Even though the thesis started with a resistance against the current trend, I believe its strengths lie in the appreciative approach that is taken. Applying the Appreciative Inquiry methodology proved to be particularly helpful in working towards an alternative future for Assen. At first, getting out of the growth-oriented trajectory seemed like an impossible task to tackle. Hence, starting with what is there already was a lot more inspiring and motivating. I believe that this positive attitude can be an effective way of getting others on board as well.

The fact that I'm not personally from Assen or its region could be seen as a weakness. I might not know as much about the identity of Assen as someone who is born and raised there. To overcome this weakness, however, a detailed investigation of the city was conducted. Especially the conversations with the local experts and the analysis of the history of Assen, proved to be very insightful. This deep interest in the city, helped to reduce the risk of me just being some outsider spatial planner who has no connection with the place and, therefore, makes inappropriate spatial suggestions. Being an outsider also had its advantages, as I could observe unique qualities of Assen that locals might have gotten used to. Besides, being an outsider who has learned to appreciate Assen signals to others in the field that they can apply the same approach and discover the local potential of cities they are not originally from.

To discover even more local qualities, it can be argued that additional conversations should be held with local residents, as many of the people I talked to were linked to the Municipality of Assen. This was useful, as the people interviewed were involved in the (spatial) development of Assen and, therefore, knowledgeable about the subject. Especially given the limited time, it was an effective way to learn a lot about the city. However, there is a risk that people working for the municipality have a certain institutional bias. Besides, the overrepresentation of municipality employees reduces the diversity of perspectives. Hence, to strengthen the research, it is important to talk to more people who are not linked to the municipality.

To develop design ideas that are appropriate for the city, Assen was investigated in much detail. This question of what is appropriate, however, is still quite personal and political. I, however, believe that having opinions and political views is part of the role of spatial planners. Richard Bolan (1983) describes the role of spatial planners as “something more than a bureaucrat or mere technical functionary” and argues that they are “active participants in the articulation of and movement toward that which is thought to be good, beneficial and valuable” (p. 23 mentioned in Moroni, 2020). I believe that the role of the urban planner should be political if one wants to contribute to political change.

During the thesis process, it was sometimes challenging to structure all the different insights I had gained from detailed readings and information-dense conversations. As a solution, it helped to write down all the information and ideas on Miro and then organise these per overarching theme, as well as separate the historic and the current discovered qualities. This way, the cluster of thoughts became more organised, making it clear which qualities could be built upon to achieve the specific goals of creating a connected, green, and dynamic city.

Originally, it was planned to use the insights to develop scenarios for Assen. Later, I thought this was no longer appropriate. It was already challenging enough to develop one scenario that was not driven by growth. Additionally, the development of scenarios suggests that there is some kind of choice to be made between the alternatives. For this project, it was more important to show that an alternative to the current trajectory is even possible. In the end, the developed design is not a final masterplan like some other master projects within the master programme might be. Instead, my developed design is an approach to transforming the city. This fits with the urbanism track, as it deals with the complexities of cities and the collective shaping of urban space.

The output consists of routes through the transformed city. If more time was allowed, more routes going through other parts of the city would be developed as well. The designed routes now only cover parts of the city, even though other parts also are filled with potential. However, ideas and design principles of the two developed routes can also be applied elsewhere. Even in places outside of Assen.

All in all, learning to appreciate Assen helped me to enjoy the field of urbanism even more. I am motivated to continue to discover and build upon local qualities and potentials in the cities I encounter.

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Writing this thesis has been my favourite project so far. It taught me how being guided by fascination and curiosity can lead to interesting and meaningful outcomes. I could not have completed this journey without the support of the people around me.

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And lastly, thank you Assen. For being a city with character.

07.

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08.

Appendices

APPENDIX I ANNOTATED SPATIAL STRATEGY FOR ASSEN

We zoeken bij al onze opgaven aansluiting bij de Sustainable Development Goals van de VN. De gemeente Assen is een SDG-gemeente.

wat betekent dit?

ASSEN IN DE TOEKOMST

Koers naar 'ontspannen stedelijkheid'

waar is de ruimte voor ontmoeten en ontspanning?

Assen is een unieke plek in Nederland. Het voormalige kloostercomplex, de historische Brink en de singels zijn de overgebleven resten van een rijke historie. Het eeuwenoude Asserbos ligt direct tegen de binnenstad aan en het Nationaal Park Drentsche Aa ligt op loopafstand. Assen biedt ruimte voor ontmoeten en ontspanning.

dus niet uitbreiden?

Het versterken van de bestaande stadsstructuur en haar kwaliteiten staat op één bij de ontwikkeling van Assen en in deze omgevingsvisie. Denk hierbij aan de groen- en natuurstructuren, de binnenstad, de cultuurhistorie, het culturele aanbod, de zorg- en onderwijsvoorzieningen en het buitengebied. Dit zijn kwaliteiten van een aantrekkelijke stad. We koesteren ook onze woonomgeving. De diversiteit aan woonwijken, ruim van opzet en dichtbij dagelijkse voorzieningen. In een wijk waar burens elkaar kennen en waar ruimte is voor ontmoeting. We noemen dit Ontspannen stedelijkheid.

Ontspannen stedelijkheid verenigt het beste van twee werelden – het is de perfecte tussenmaat. Een bruisende stad met alle voorzieningen die je mag verwachten, zonder de nadelen die zich voordoen als het te groot, te druk en te veel wordt. Een ontspannen stad bezit de groene kwaliteiten en de ruimte om te wonen, te bewegen en te ontmoeten. Een plek om fijn te wonen, te werken en te verblijven.

wat voor voorzieningen zijn dat?

Met de Asser Ambitie Agenda (AAA) hebben we samen met Ondernemend Assen en Vaart in Assen, op basis van ons bestaand beleid, een toekomstbeeld voor Assen gedefinieerd. De AAA is een beweging die de ambities van ondernemers, onderwijs, maatschappelijke organisaties en overheid samenbrengt. De hoofdambities zijn gericht op uitbreiding van wonen (10.000 woningen), werken (5000 banen) en hoger en middelbaar onderwijs. Deze ambities willen we bereiken door in te zetten op de versterking en doorontwikkeling van onze Asser krachtsectoren, veiligheid, zorg en duurzaamheid.

waarom? middelen worden boven doelen gesteld?

meer woningen dan banen erbij? krijg je dan niet een slaapstad?

Groene stad van het Noorden:

Groen en natuur zijn onmisbaar voor een aantrekkelijke stad. Voor de Assenaren, voor iedereen die onze stad bezoekt, voor bedrijven die een vestigingsplek zoeken en voor dieren die belangrijk zijn voor de biodiversiteit.

groen voor bedrijven?

Ten slotte heeft de ambitie 'groene stad' nog een andere dimensie: die van een duurzame, circulaire en klimaatneutrale stad. Deze dimensie werkt door in de inrichting van de stad. Bijvoorbeeld in woningen en gebouwen, in de manier waarop we ons verplaatsen, hoe we produceren en met niet-hernieuwbare grondstoffen omgaan.

dus minder auto's?

Fig 66. Annotated Spatial Strategy (Omgevingsvisie) for Assen (Gemeente Assen, 2026; modified).

Dynamische hoofdstad:

In de dynamische hoofdstad heeft Assen een compleet aanbod van voorzieningen. In de binnenstad vindt je een specifiek aanbod van winkels en horeca. Daarmee vervult Assen een sterke regiofunctie. De inwoners van Assen hoeven niet naar een andere gemeente voor hun aankopen, zorg, sport, onderwijs of cultuur. De belangrijkste basisvoorzieningen liggen in de wijken. Kortom je komt naar Assen om te wonen, te werken, te winkelen, te recreëren en het beleven van culturele activiteiten.

die hebben andere woonbehoeftes, wellicht geen eengezinswoning?

Een dynamische stad kan niet zonder haar toekomst: jongeren van 16-24 jaar. Voor deze groep moet een uitdagend aanbod zijn en blijven van onderwijs-, sport-, ontmoetings- en uitgaansvoorzieningen. Bij een dynamische hoofdstad hoort daarom een levendige binnenstad.

meer dan Assen gezinsstad

in hoeverre onderscheidend?

TT wel

Op een aantal sectoren onderscheidt Assen zich in de regio. Het gaat om de zorg-, onderwijs-, overheids-, cultuur- en vrijetijdsector. Denk hierbij aan het Wilhelmina ziekenhuis, de Johan Willem Friso kazerne, het Drents Museum, Podium Zuidhaege, De Nieuwe Kolk, de Bonte Wever en niet te vergeten het internationaal toonaangevende TT-circuit.

welke regio? hoe groot is die? wat is het bereik van Assen?

Het is voor al deze sectoren van belang dat Assen vanuit de regio goed en snel bereikbaar is via het verkeersnetwerk. Het spoor en de (fiets)snellwegen verbinden Assen met de regio en de rest van het land. Op die manier houden we de voorzieningen met regionale functies bereikbaar en vitaal.

Verbonden stad:

In een verbonden stad doet iedereen mee en is er aandacht voor iedereen. Een voorbeeld hiervan is het tegengaan van eenzaamheid. Dit is nu nog vaak een onzichtbaar probleem. Maar het kan bijvoorbeeld ook gaan over toegankelijke routes voor mindervaliden en ouderen of de opvang en huisvesting van ontheemden.

mogelijk ook een groter wordend probleem

Een verbonden stad heeft sterke wijken. We streven naar woonwijken die veilig, compact en overzichtelijk zijn. Met woningen voor jong en oud, gezinnen, stellen en alleenstaanden.

in hoeverre past dit bij de uitbreidingswijken?

Mensen in een verbonden stad gaan graag naar buiten. Om te bewegen, te spelen, te sporten maar ook om elkaar te ontmoeten. In een verbonden stad zijn er weinig sociale en fysieke barrières. Assen is en blijft een overzichtelijke stad. Woonwijken, het buitengebied en de binnenstad zijn goed verbonden. Met comfortabele, veilige en het liefst groene aantrekkelijke wandel- en fietsroutes.

komt dit overeen met huidige layout van Assen?

hoe?

Binnenstad als pleisterplaats voor de gehele stad

APPENDIX II INVESTIGATION OF BUILDING AGE DISTRIBUTION, COMPARING DIFFERENT NEIGHBOURHOODS

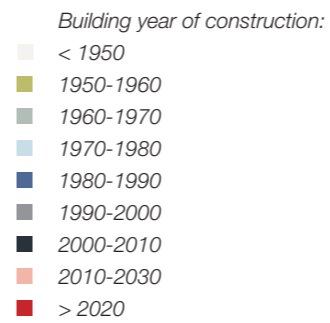


Fig 67. Investigation of building age distribution, comparing Kloosterveen, Pittelo, Lariks, Peelo, and Assen-Oost (PDOK, 2025; modified).



APPENDIX III ANNOTATED "IDENTITY PAPER" ABOUT ASSEN

*Old structures of the city.
They make Assen green, compact, and
accessible.*

*Preventing Assen from becoming a
place like any other place.*

*Remember her (the identity of Assen that
has been formed throughout time)*

*Greenery that continuous into the
city centre.*

*Assen is modest (or humble).
If it is up to the city, she "crawls
undemeath her green blanket."*

*Keep th city lively. Cherish the spaces that
are meant for encounters.*

A city makes long days.

*Each neighbourhood in Assen has its own
identity.*

A neighbourhood must be active (lively).

Fig 68. Annotated "idenitty paper" from De
Novelle (Gemeente Assen, 2005; modified).

Identiteitspapier

Op de kansrijke overgang van zand en veen liggen de wortels van Assen.
Oude structuren geven de stad haar eigen gezicht.
Ze maken Assen groen, compact en bereikbaar.
Koester deze dragers van de stad.
Ze behoeden haar voor dertien in een dozijn.

De identiteit van Assen is door de eeuwen heen gegroeid.
Onthoud haar.
Noem Assen desnoods fatsoenlijk, braaf, provinciaal.
Assenaren beleven de identiteit van hun stad anders dan buitenstaanders.
Voor ons is fatsoenlijk veilig, braaf degelijk en provinciaal vriendelijk.
En wat is er tegen veiligheid, degelijkheid en vriendelijkheid?

Assen is een groene stad.
Groen dat doordringt tot in het stadshart.
Stevige bomen die zomers beschutting bieden.
En 's winters het idee levend houden dat het leven gewoon doorgaat.
Tot in de kleinste aderen van de stad.

Assen is bescheiden en denkt dat dat een deugd is.
Als je de stad de kans geeft, kruipt ze weg onder haar groene deken.
Lopen we weer met z'n allen te doen alsof de stad natuur is.
Assen moet het groen voor zich laten werken.
Maak de stad monumentaal groen.
Hou de stad gezellig. Koester haar als plek van ontmoetingen.
Gezelligheid bestaat bij de gratie van compactheid en de verrassing om de hoek.
Een stad maakt lange dagen.

Rond een stads hart liggen dorpse wijken.
Een ander tempo, andere functies.
De wijken van Assen hebben elk hun eigen plek en hun eigen tijd.
Een wijk is meer dan wonen en slapen. Een wijk moet leven.

Een stad die bijna af is, maar nooit klaar.
Een gezellig druk stadshart, levendige wijken er vlak omheen
En plekken waar het goed werken is.
Waarom zou een industrieterrein altijd lelijk moeten zijn?
Bij een groene stad hoort een bedrijvenpark.

Maak Assen herkenbaar in één oogopslag.
Geef de stad de beelden die ervoor zorgen dat je haar onthoudt.
En dat je denkt: dit is mijn stad.

Inhabitants should think: this is my city.

