

Synanthropic* Habitats

HOFJES AS THRESHOLDS FOR DIVERSE HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN ENVIRONMENTS

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*sin-an-'thräp-ik: on the basis of Greek
synanthrōpeúesthai, synanthrōpízein "to live with others"



Intérieur dans les LANDES (Lou Pachedeuy)

F. Bernard, 1891, Morcenx - Landes

Fig 01 - 'Intérieur dans les Landes, France (Lou pachedeuy)'. Oxen were a source of traction, fertilizer, warmth and company. 'Pachedeuy' was a mixture of hay and bran used as forage. (Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>)

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PART ONE
INTRODUCTION

PERSONAL STATEMENT

It was March 2020, I was crouched over my books designing my diploma thesis project that was dealing with the formation of a new community at an abandoned settlement based on production processes as a response to the emergence of a new ecology¹, when COVID-19 has come as a bolt from the blue. This submicroscopic agent has not only unnormalized our daily life but has also been embedded in our collective consciousness forced us to adjust our living conditions in ways that we did not anticipate; and particularly for me, it was a grotesque occurrence. At the time, I was so immersed in a project that was revolving around sustainable practices and societal issues that pandemic's outbreak make me realise that during the last 5 years of my architectural education I was unpretentiously reproducing the anthropocentric binary of human (us) and nature (them) without critically question it. This ancient dialectic of a mechanized perception of nature has been shaken from this tiny inhalable particle, trigger-

ing a scientific discourse around a new interdisciplinary quest on *"how will we live together"*; posed among others by Hashim Sarkis for the purposes of the Venice Biennale in an effort to transcend all disciplines and open the topic to a large spectrum of confrontations from the multiplicity of species to the climate change and global inequalities.

The aforementioned question has been in my head since the beginning of my studies at TU Delft and with the choice of Advanced Housing Design Studio through its theme *"Ecology of Inclusion"* I aspire that I can put into test some of my thoughts; but most importantly, to have the opportunity to touch upon issues of social inclusivity, interaction with non-human species and nature's integration to the design. What can bring together people of different cultural, linguistic, religious, educational, ethnic backgrounds? What are the qualities of a space that can possibly invite both human and non-human? What are the benefits of coexistence between strangers and between humans and non-humans? Which are the commons or the *"acts of commoning"* that bridge the once heterogeneous entities together? The graduation

project and the present research plan as the backbone of the design aim to creatively and innovatively address this series of queries and to spatially centralised them into an evidence-based architectural proposition.

¹ The project explored and problematize the dynamic proximity of the emerged water bodies with nearby settlements as a result of the unprecedented phenomenon of the incessant rainfall in 2019 that affected the everlasting drought-stricken island of Cyprus.

INTRODUCTION

Cities, we learn from ecocity studies, could be rebuilt to fit gracefully, non-destructively, even regeneratively into their bioregions. They could become instruments accomplishing two priceless goals: (1.) fuller creative evolution of society and the individual, and (2.) healthy coevolution and mutual support with nature (Register 1987 pp. 7–8)

Problématique: *the need of thresholds as “eventful” spaces*

The entry of the new millennium has come with a tremendous ascertainment for humanity; that the history of our planet is no longer explicitly subject to the geological time scale but is also inextricably intertwined to the impact of human beings on the planet, to such a drastic extent that can alter the rock strata. The acknowledgment of this activity prompted the scientific community to introduce the current period as the Anthropocene epoch. This epoch, although has not yet been officially declared, had led to the exacerbation of environmental movements, activist groups, ecologically oriented companies as well as to the pursuit of sustainability ethics and eco-friendly solutions covering the whole spectrum of human activity, from the macroscale of urbanization processes to the microscale of domestic practices. Apart from that, tones of ink have been spent to synthesize methods to counteract climate change as the admittedly spearhead of this ecological catastrophe, in an effort to give an answer on how we can live in healthy environments in the future alongside

nature. The thorny question which is raising is: how can we regenerate cohabitation milieus (i.e. environments of coexistence) which are not only coping with the climatic phenomena but at the same time are also creating the appropriate circumstances of commoning under which human and non-human can reciprocally coexist?

The port-city Rotterdam encapsulates the aforementioned challenges and spatializes the tensions evoking from the climate crisis as well as from its prevailing identity as a transportation hub, magnetizing people from all over the world. On the one hand, the municipality of Rotterdam has laid down strategies to resist the dynamic climate change¹, while on the other hand, the city is facing an enormous challenge of increased residential and social segregation (Engbersen 2014). Blijdorp, as the given site under investigation, due to its central position in the urban fabric, its proximity to the heavy transport infrastructure, and the existing green corridor of the zoo to the west, provides the fertile ground and holds the potential to set in practice innovative design ideas on

¹ cf. Rotterdam climate-proof adaptation strategy issued by the municipality of Rotterdam

how we can revisit the housing model, reflecting upon both the climatic and social issue. The departure for the quest can not only be confined to the way we can live together with the non-human, but most importantly, it should touch upon what is lurking behind the commons that bring together the different entities.

The site is being characterized by large-scale building structures that are disproportional to the nearby urban grain as well as from a clear tetratomy shaped from the vertical and horizontal axes which are cutting it through. One can easily notice that neither the urban rhythm, of the adjacent neighbourhood with the continuous facades of the Dutch row houses, nor the tectonic typology and materiality of the buildings in the neighbouring blocks comply with the structures on the site. In line with the above, the site lies between a high-tension area to the south and a relatively lower-frequency area to the north while the vast openness of the site to all directions diminishes the chance of threshold spaces² as in-between spaces

² Thresholds as places that create the conditions of entry or exit into heterotopias of commoning; thresholds prolong, manipulate and give meaning to an act of passage.

that do not only allow the community life to thrive but also are essential as transitional spaces between the inner (dwelling) and the outer (urban) life (Stavrides, 2016) of Blijdorp’s inhabitants. In the same direction, the limited existence of green space in combination with the noise pollution from the train station draws also the non-human species out of the area. It is of paramount importance to problematize both the lack of thresholds and the human-scale enclosed spaces that seem to be the “Achilles heel” for the healthy liveability of the site. Which is the spatial amalgam of the above-mentioned problematizations? What is the transitional architectural space that is missing from the context that spatially encompasses these queries? ***How can the introduction of thresholds and a re-definition of “hofjes” (dutch courtyard) -as the publicly accessible enclosed space, a shared green place, and a collective infrastructure- allow for the coexistence of human and non-human in Blijdorp today?***

Hypothesis: *inclusive architecture through the re-interpretation of "hofjes"*

The coupling of the need for an ecologically resilient environment with the imperative need of reducing residential segregation and improve the social cohesion dictates a new typology that will shift the paradigm of Dutch Housing. I argue that this has to be developed on the basis of cooperative housing, injected with the concept of *synanthropic habitats*, in the sense of harmoniously living with the otherness -implying everything that holds a sense of heterogeneity either between a group of strangers or amongst humans and non-humans. The construction of such a paradigm requires the introduction of green threshold places where the overlapping quotidian practices among people as part of the human system, and the existence of non-humans can participate in a game of blended cohabitation. I advocate that the common ground of this coexistence can be traced back to the traditional Dutch "*hofjes*" as places of encouragement of encounters, both a refuge for the species but also for the dwellers belonging in the local community as well as the occasional pas-

sengers.

The cooperative concept of housing has an inherent democratic character of ownership acquisition as well as an increased sense of sharing and caring for the common areas (e.g. laundering room, shared kitchen, roof terraces, shared lounges) of the residential complex. The non-speculation basis of such housing models along with the political and economic disposition of its members enable, on the one hand, to build highly diverse affordable environments, and on the other hand to create experimental dwelling typologies. The traits of the cooperative housing in tandem with the introduction of threshold places and the contemporary redefinition of the central courtyard³ addresses the overarching theme of the ecology of inclusion by means of meeting the actual needs and diversifying the users⁴ while simultaneously create in the epicentre of a heavily urbanized environment such as Rotterdam, green oases for the living organisms.

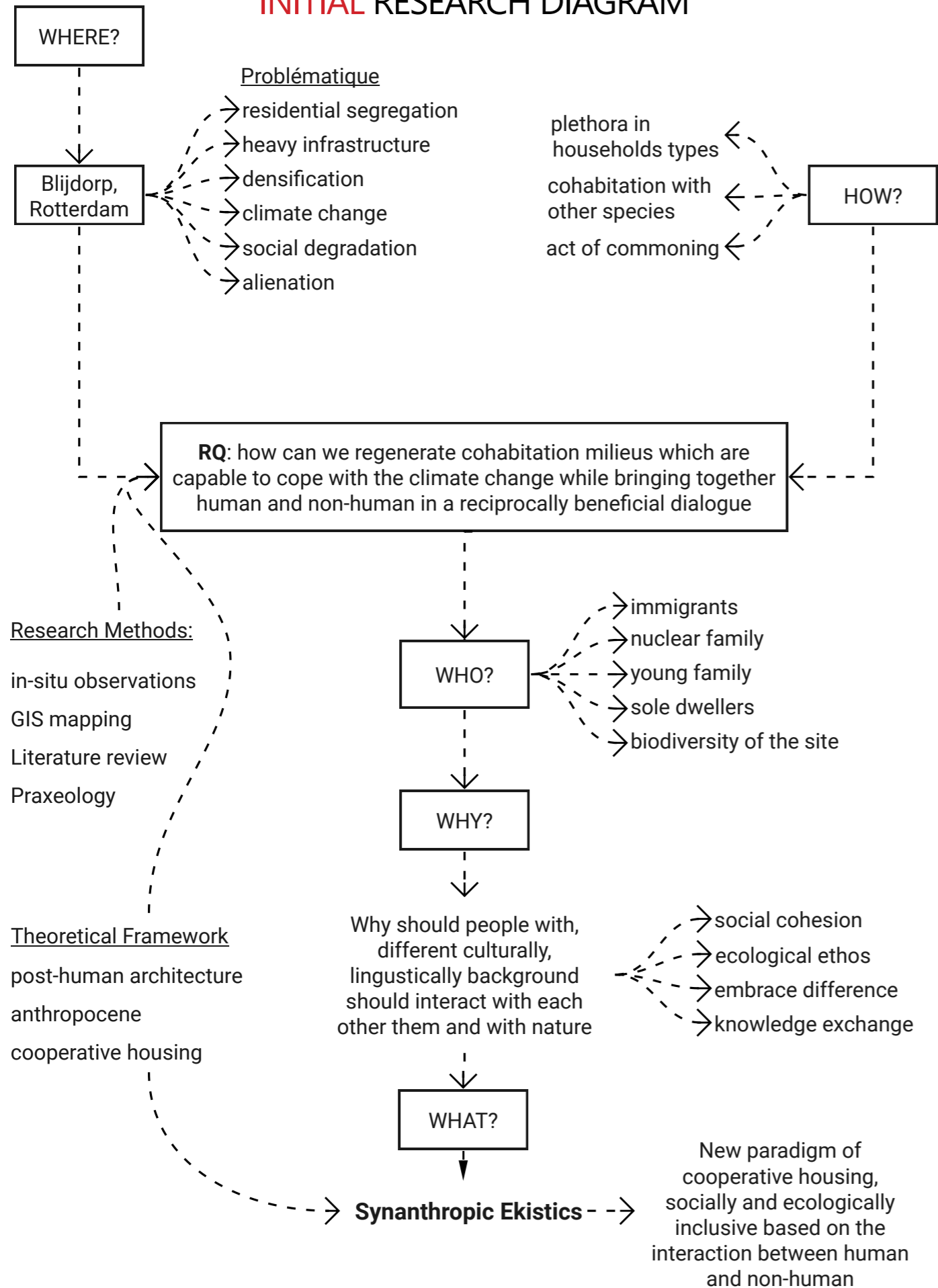
³ cf. case studies selection on page ...

⁴ The creation of urban commons are inextricably link with the density and heterogeneity of people (Huron 2018)

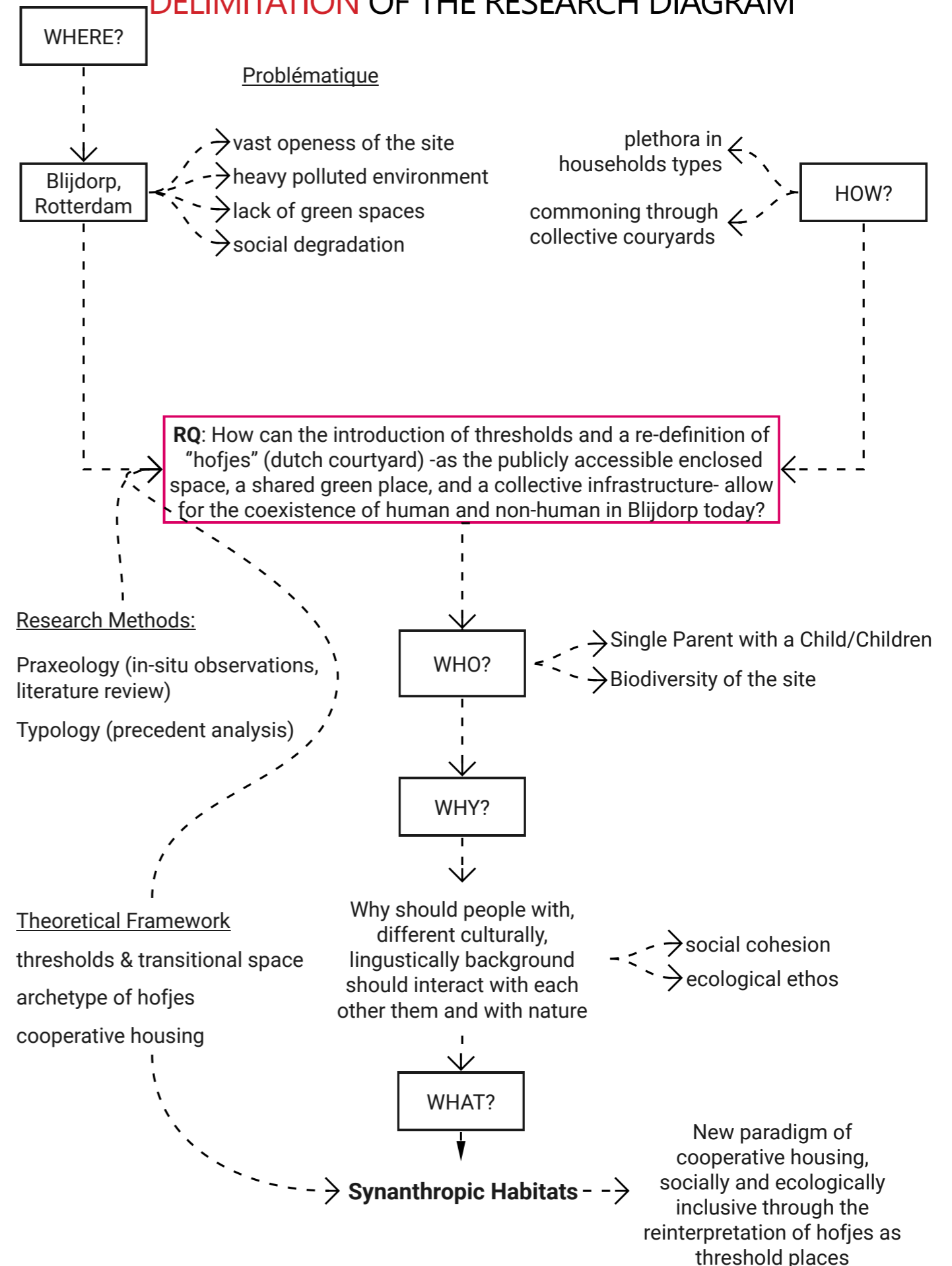


Fig 02 - The Courtyard of a House in Delft by Pieter de Hooch, 1658, Collection of the National Gallery, London (Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>)

INITIAL RESEARCH DIAGRAM



DELIMITATION OF THE RESEARCH DIAGRAM



PART TWO

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Methods and Methodology:

I. In situ observations : studio and individual work

The studio site visit and the subsequent division of the students into seven thematic aspects for the area's urban analysis in order to read the site under a variety of research lenses has been the primary yet rudimentary method. The tree-week long analysis has revealed insightful facts for the Blijdorp on both the social and the ecological level that are instrumental for the formation of an urban strategy and a programme for individual design. Distilling the salient conclusions of each of the categories/ perspectives with an emphasis on the scopes of this research proposal the main issues that emerged are epigrammatically concerning the following: poor quality of public space, a car-oriented neighbourhood, the scarcity of green spaces, the isolation from the existing biodiversity corridor, the unhealthfulness of the adjacent rail tracks (air and noise pollution), the prevailing campus-like character of the area as well as the lack of safe transitional spaces that lead to the en-

tire cut off condition with the surroundings.

All of the above has shed light on the innate identity of the interrogated area and has been the essential stepstone to envisioned possible futures for Blijdorp and the metropolis of Rotterdam; albeit this is an ongoing process that will be taking place throughout the entire graduation year. Complementary addendum to this praxeological method of in-situ observations is a series of interviews that will be conducted from the inhabitants of the area aiming to shape a wholistic image of the site's everyday activity as well as other documentation material from the on-site experience.

Synopses:

- Epistemes: Praxeology
- Key terms, concepts, theories: common space, threshold, cooperative housing, Stavros Stavrides, Amanda Huron

II. Precedent Analysis: Courtyard as an essential tool for communal living and an opportunity for species inclusion

The idea of revisiting *hofjes* has been born from the problématique and the guiding quest of finding an architectural space with such qualities that can encapsulate the triptych of an enclosed human-scale but publicly accessible inner-block space, an opportunistic habitat for other living organisms and at the same time providing a place for interaction and encounter among all the human and non-human actors. Historically *hofjes* have been "secret courtyards" in communal complexes intended mainly for elderly people or religious women (Cieraad 2017) as a privately defined regime for social security and welfare. Progressively, they have opened up to the rest of the social groups of users hosting a plethora of activities and being an integral part of urban life.

Typologically *hofjes* have been invisible behind a wall (archetype), monumental or a combination of those two, in disguise as a city palace (Wilms Floet 2019). They have traditionally been a place

of memory and a locus of historic referencing still surviving today as *type*⁵ in cities' historic centres. The challenge is how can we revisit this archetypical space in the contemporary context? What are the elements that enable this rather enclosed space to become a place of passage in the sense of threshold? How we can transmit and enrich its architectural qualities in a new housing design? The questions formulated here aspired to be the genesis of the design, and a typological framework for developing a new dwelling type.

Synopses:

- Epistemes: Typology, Ecology
- Key terms, concepts, theories: hofje, innerblock building type, urban element, archetype, Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, Aldo Rossi

⁵ cf. the work and meaning of type from N. L. Durand to Neo-Rationalists

III. Literature Review: Thresholds and Commoning

Thresholds and commoning have been relatively new terms for the metropolitan urbanized context. They are sites open to public use in which, however, rules and forms of use do not depend upon and are not controlled by a prevailing authority (Stavrídes 2016). Stavrides in his book *Towards the City of Thresholds* (2019) unravels new forms of socialization and uses of space—self-managed and communal—by representing the city as a stage of manifestation of social antagonism and spatial emancipation. The theoretical findings of his work which are intersecting the Lefebvrian and Foucauldian philosophies are critical in subverting the predominant despotism of housing design norms, largely employed in cities like Rotterdam.

In this directive, cooperative housing as the non-commodified collectively governed resource (Huron 2018) provides the spatial paraphernalia for the creation of commons and community—without the one necessarily preceding the other.

In this housing models, the rules of use are also having a threshold character, constantly changing while the subjects (commoners/inhabitants) are open to negotiations with the newcomers. The epitome of this theoretical framework is vital to structure the matrix wherein the lexis will eventually lead to the praxis.

Synopses:

- Epistemes: Praxeology (socio-spatial practices), Ecology
- Key terms, concepts, theories: Threshold, Cooperatives, Commoning, Appropriation, Transitional Spaces, Porosity, Stavros Stavrides, Amanda Huron, Till Boettger, Paola Viganò, George Teyssot, Walter Benjamin.



Fig 03 - A Dutch Courtyard by Pieter de Hooch, 1658-1650, Mauritshuis, The Hague, Netherlands. (Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>)

PART THREE

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

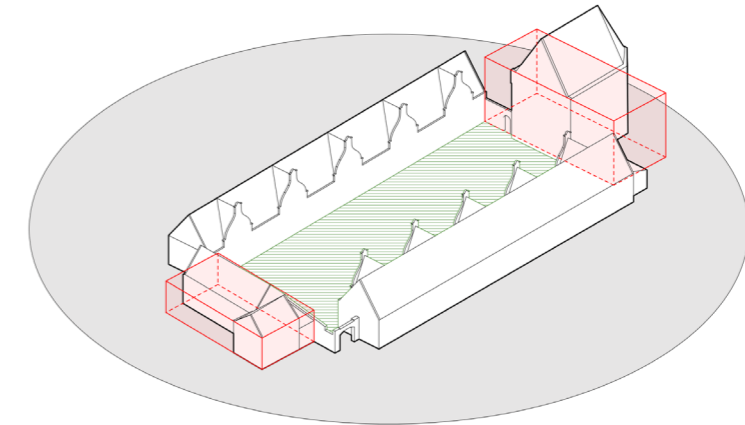


Fig 04 - The Archetype of Hofje and the Gate as a Threshold Space (Source: author)

Preliminary Conclusions: *The multiscalar translation of hofjes in Blidorp today*

The hofje due to its robust architectural type comprising of distinct components and a clear social agenda of housing provision has been sustainably surviving and successfully inhabited as a constituent architectural figure in the Dutch city since the Middle Ages, by adapting to the changing needs of different epochs and users (Floet 2019). Its conventional representation as the central outdoor space surrounded by a repetitive group of houses has therefore as many variations as the spatial limitations of the respective site or the alterations that had undergone throughout its life. With a closer reading at historical examples of hofjes we can identify that are multiscalar edifices which correspond to the scale of the city as enclosed publicly accessible territories, to the scale of the neighbourhood as collective infrastructures, and the scale of the building as communal green enclaves. What is significantly notable for this typology is that the transitional element of the entrance has not only been the spatial passage (threshold) to the inner court but also a predominant feature with a semantic essence as it was aiming to commemorate the noble founder

that subsidised the development.

Endorsing the principles and analogies that can be found in the historical precedents and through insights from contemporary references and the knowledge of the site's characteristics, the hofje typology can be productively translated into Blijdorp, Rotterdam. Placing such a typology adjacent to the road, three different scenarios of thresholds in response to the multiscalar nature of hofje will emerge: i) the threshold between the building and the urban armature (i.e. the peripheral space in-between the building and the mobility network), ii) the threshold of the gates/entrances leading from the public domain to the secured domesticated green enclosure and iii) the smaller scale transitional spaces within the innerblock typology (staircases, loggia, portico) -that are not only functionally necessary but are also spaces of encounter and coexistence between the residents. In this manner, the threshold surpasses the merely theoretical dimension and is being converted into an architecturally inflected element to dialogue both with the surroundings and the internal parts of the building. The manipulation of the dynamic architectural synergies of the multi-layered threshold spaces, provides among other things, a

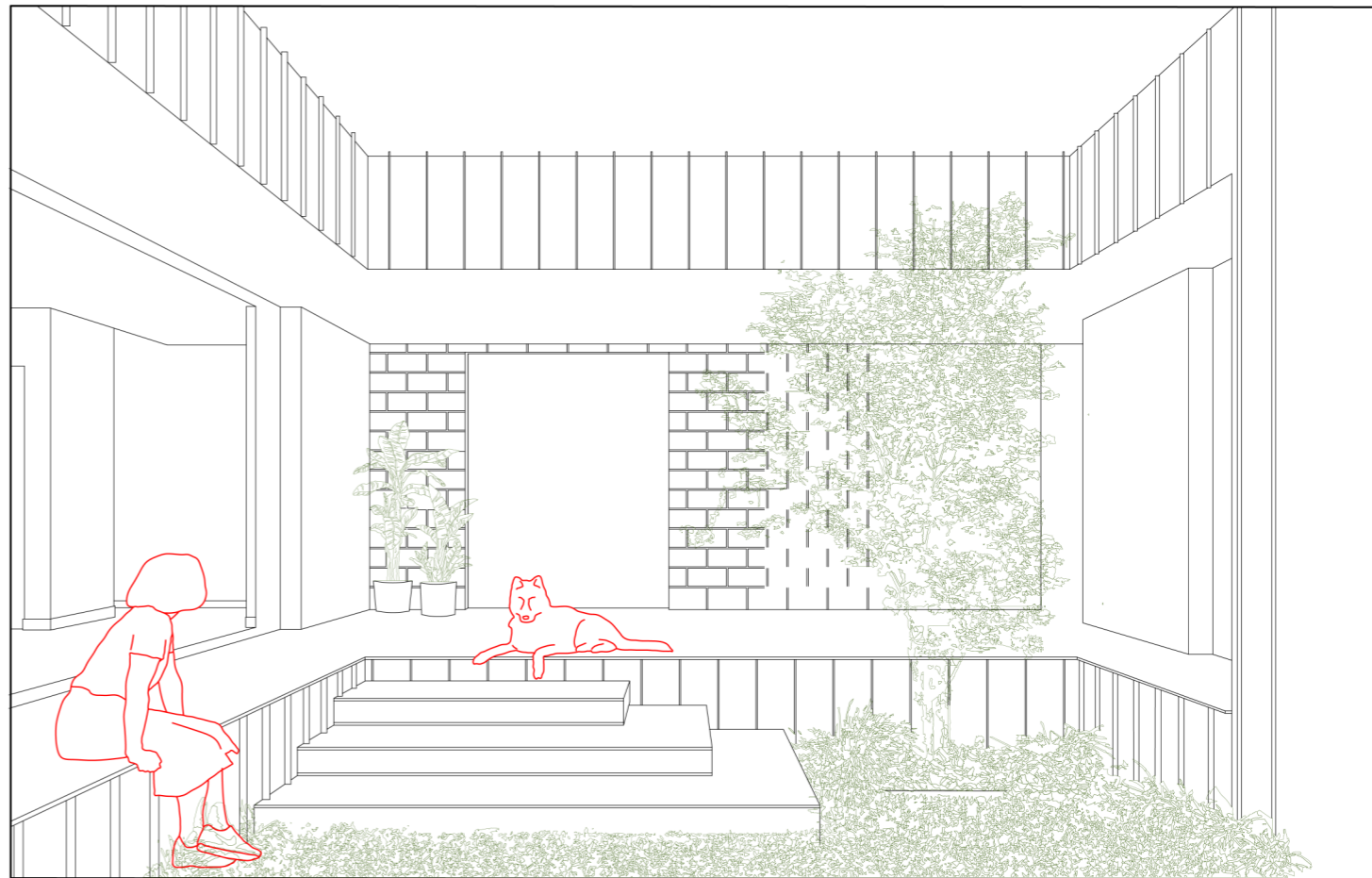
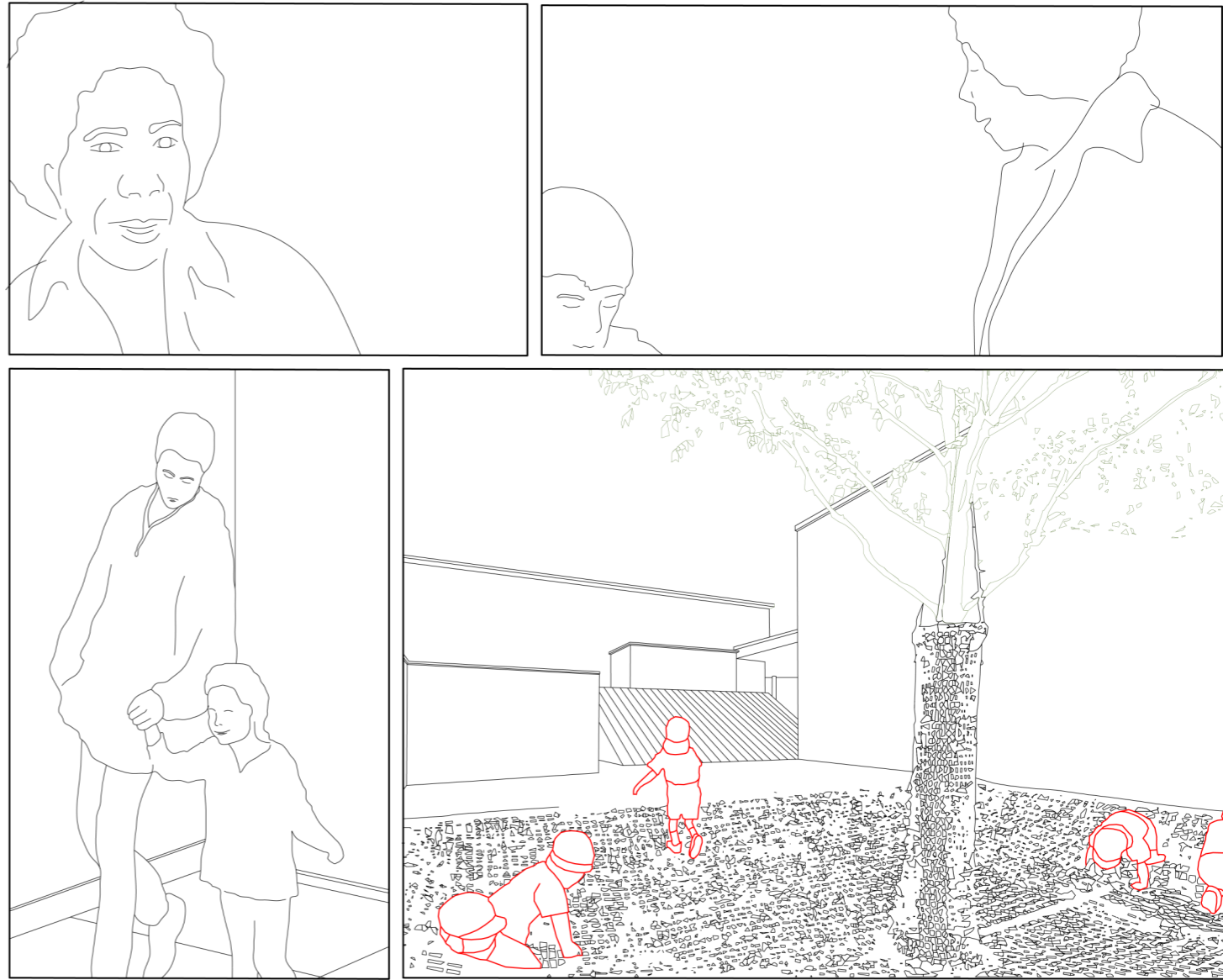
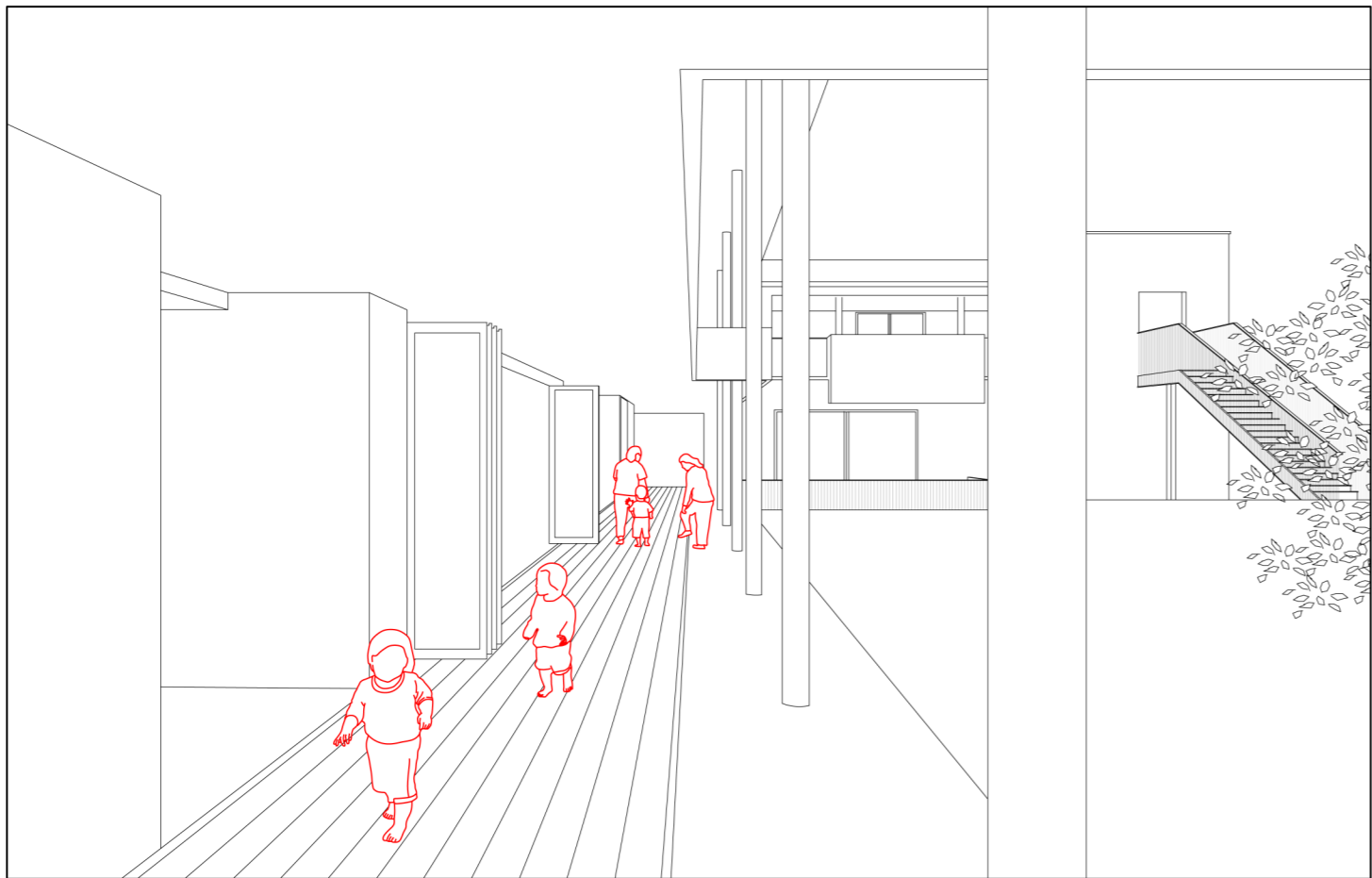
great opportunity to escape from the conventional image of the rather introverted courtyard of the archetypical hofje. Designing the threshold and putting under the microscope the edge condition, the once solid and impenetrable walls can now be treated as porous surfaces, thereby transforming the central garden into a receptive interface of human and non-human actors. In this logic, the building is an ecology itself that belongs to a constellation of ecologies in the vicinity (e.g. urban networks, natural environment, etc) susceptible to a contemporary interpretation where inclusivity both social and ecological are inventively celebrated.

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**A Glimpse of the Graphic Novel & the User Group**  
*(this text is part of the ongoing research for P2):*

Hofjes has historically provided housing to a certain group of people in a specific stage of life, for instance, elderly or women (Floet 2011) while as a type per se is inherently promoting the community living under a protected state of collectively inhabiting around a green space. Hence, the user group that I envision to accommodate my proposal regards the single parent with a child or children in an effort to offer, on the one hand, the circumstances of productive interaction and safe upbringing of the young members while on the other hand integrating the parents into a communal life with their peers. Apart from that, this user group choice complements the range of target groups (elderly, women, sole dwellers, families, students) that are being accommodated in other parts of the site. In line with that, the following storyline depicts the story of a mother and her child at the Rotterdam Station, escorted by a man to the closest cooperative housing complex which is destined for single parents with children, where they experience the space and eventually dwell. The novel is a work in progress that is going to be delivered at the end of the second quarter.







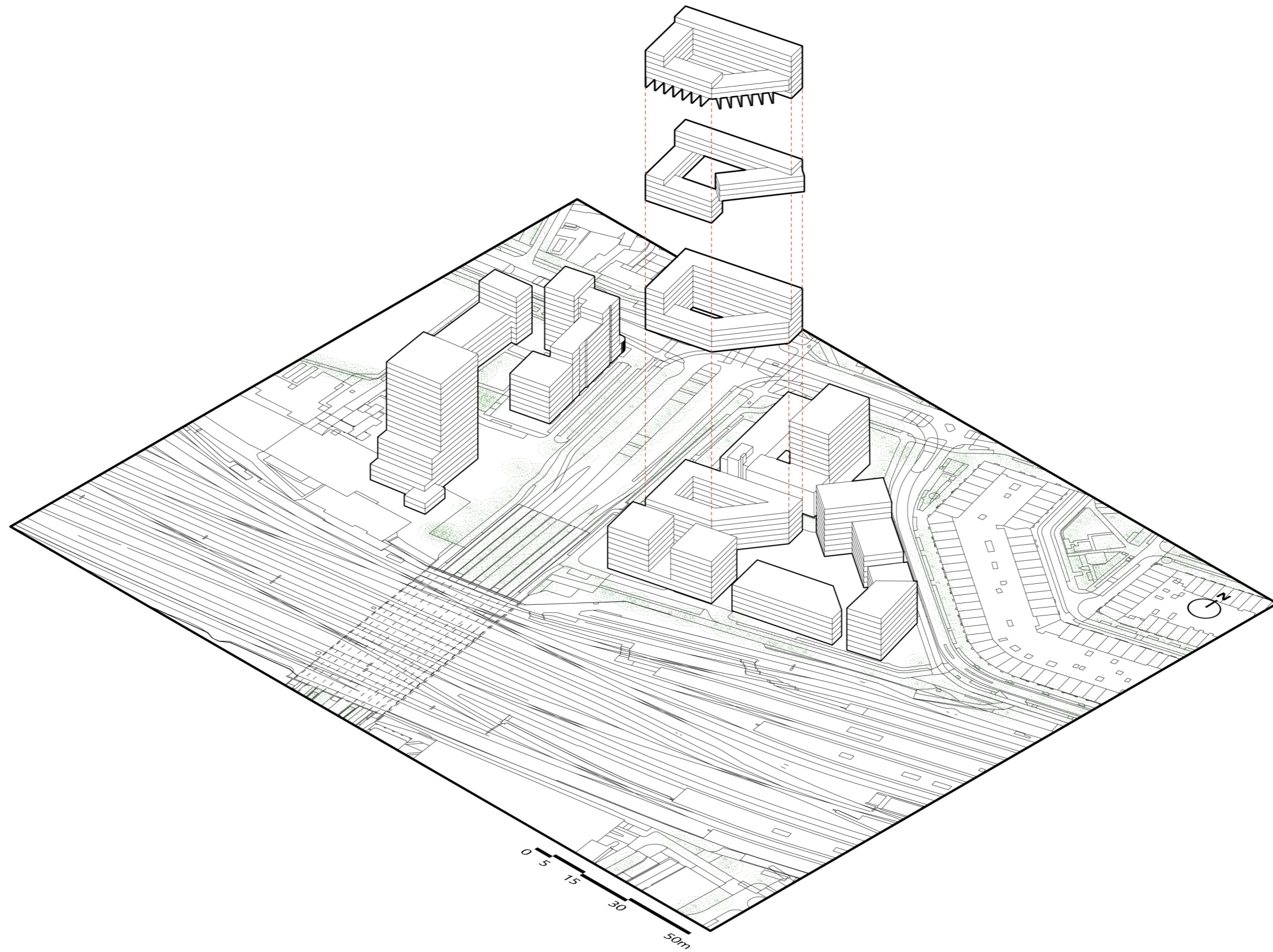


Fig 05 - Volumetric Variations of the Type as a porous entity  
(Source: author)



## Appendix I: Pool of Case Studies

{contemporary references}

1. Almshouse / Witherford Watson Mann's, Central London, 2019 (<https://www.archdaily.com/780345/central-london-almshouse-promotes-sociability-for-the-elderly>)
  2. **Silchester Estate / Haworth Tompkins, North London, 2016** (<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/buildings/building-study-haworth-tompkins-remakes-the-street-at-silchester-estate>)
  3. Johannes Enschedé Hof Haarle/ Patrick Eichhorn et al, Haarlem, 2007 (<https://www.architectuur.nl/project/johannes-enschede-hof-haarlem/>)
  4. BIGyard (Zelterstrasse) / Zanderroth Architekten, Berlin, 2010 (<https://www.zanderroth.de/en/projekte/ze05/255>)
  5. **Carré Lumière / LAN Architecture, Bordeaux, France, 2015** (<https://www.archdaily.com/777567/carre-lumiere-lan-architecture>)
  6. La Borda co-op housing:/ Lacol, Barcelona, 2018 (<http://www.lacol.coop/projectes/labor-da/>)
  7. Kalkbreite/ Müller Sigrist Architekten, Zürich, 2014 (<https://www.archdaily.com/903384/>)
  8. Cooperative Housing Complex wagnisART / bogevischs buero architekten stadtplaner GmbH + SHAG Schindler Hable, Munich, 2016 (<https://www.archdaily.com/889159/>)
  9. Iroko Housing/ Coin Street Community Builders , London , 2004 (<https://www.haworthtompkins.com/work/iroko-housing>)
- >The list is formulated under the following format: Name of the Project/ Architect(s), Location, Date of Completion (Website of the Project) <

## Appendix I: Pool of Case Studies

{historic references}

### Amsterdam:

1. Brants Rushofje, 1734
2. Deutzenhofje, 1694
3. **Harmoniehof, 1922**
4. Hofje van Brienen, 1806
5. Sint Andrieshofje, 1616

### Delft:

6. Hofje van Pauw, 1706

### Den Haag:

7. Hofje van Nieuwkoop, 1661

### Dordrecht:

8. Arend Maartenshofje, 1625
9. Regenten- en Lenghenhof, 1755-1892

### Haarlem:

10. Hofje van Oorschot, 1768
11. Hofje van Staats, 1733
12. **Proveniershof, 1707**
13. Teylershofje, 1789
14. Van Noblet, 1761

### Leiden:

15. Hofje Meermansburg, Leiden, 1681
16. Hofje van Samuel de Zee, Leiden, 1734

*The case studies highlighted in red have been selected by the author for a thorough analysis during the second quarter.*

>The selection was primarily based on the size of the hofje (area & dwelling units) as well as on the form (innerblock or "L" shape building) <



**CASE STUDY ONE**

Carré Lumière / LAN Architecture, Bordeaux, 2015



Fig 06 - Compactness and Fragmentation of the Building through the openings on its facade © LAN Architecture (Source <https://www.archdaily.com/>)





Fig 07 - The Communal Garden of the Complex © Philip Vile (Source: <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/>)

## CASE STUDY TWO

Silchester Estate/ Haworth Tompkins, West London, 2016

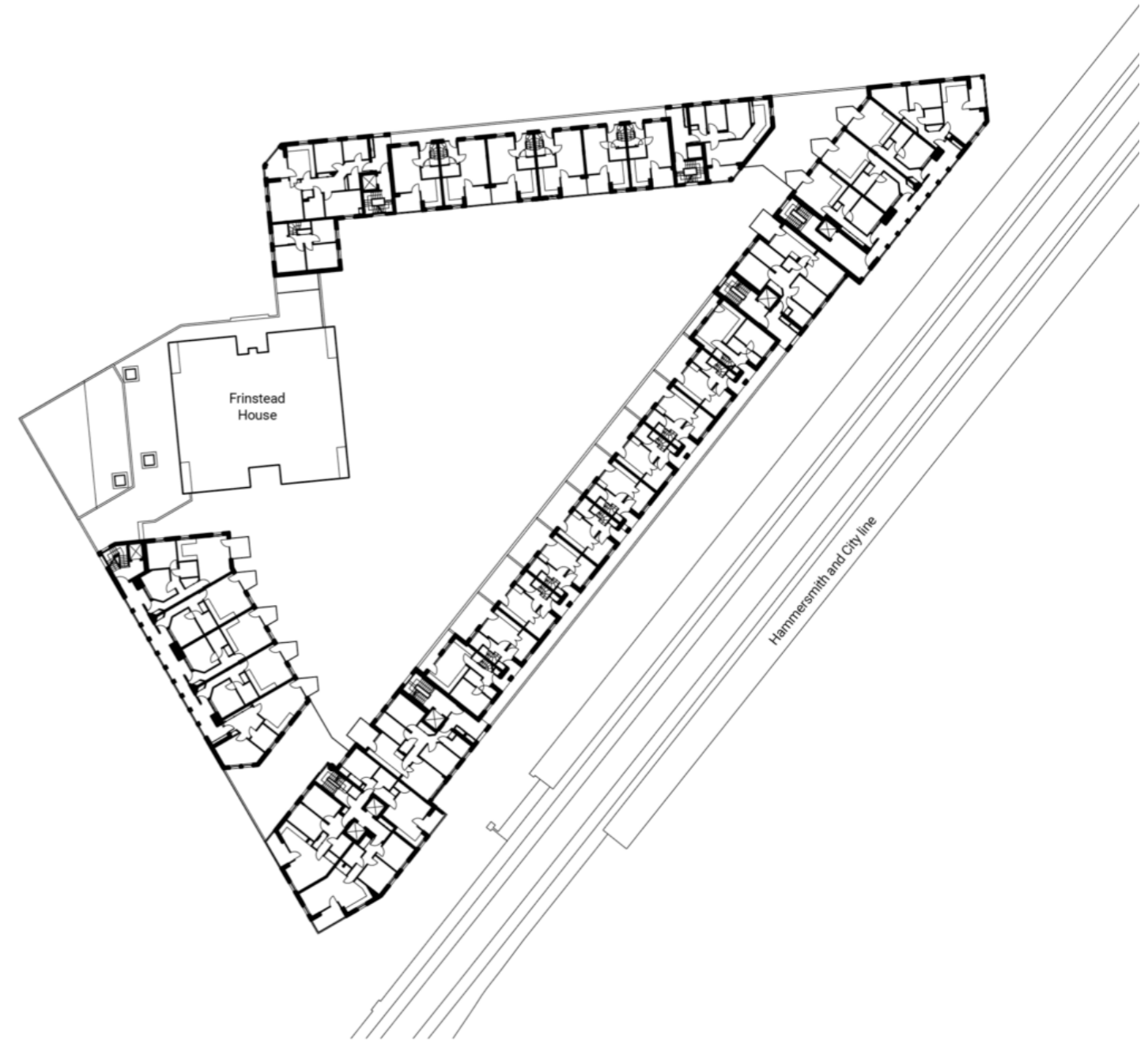






Fig 08 - Proveniershof's Courtyard © Sjoerd van der Galien (Source: <https://m3bbuust.nl/>)

### CASE STUDY THREE

Proveniershof, Haarlem, 1707

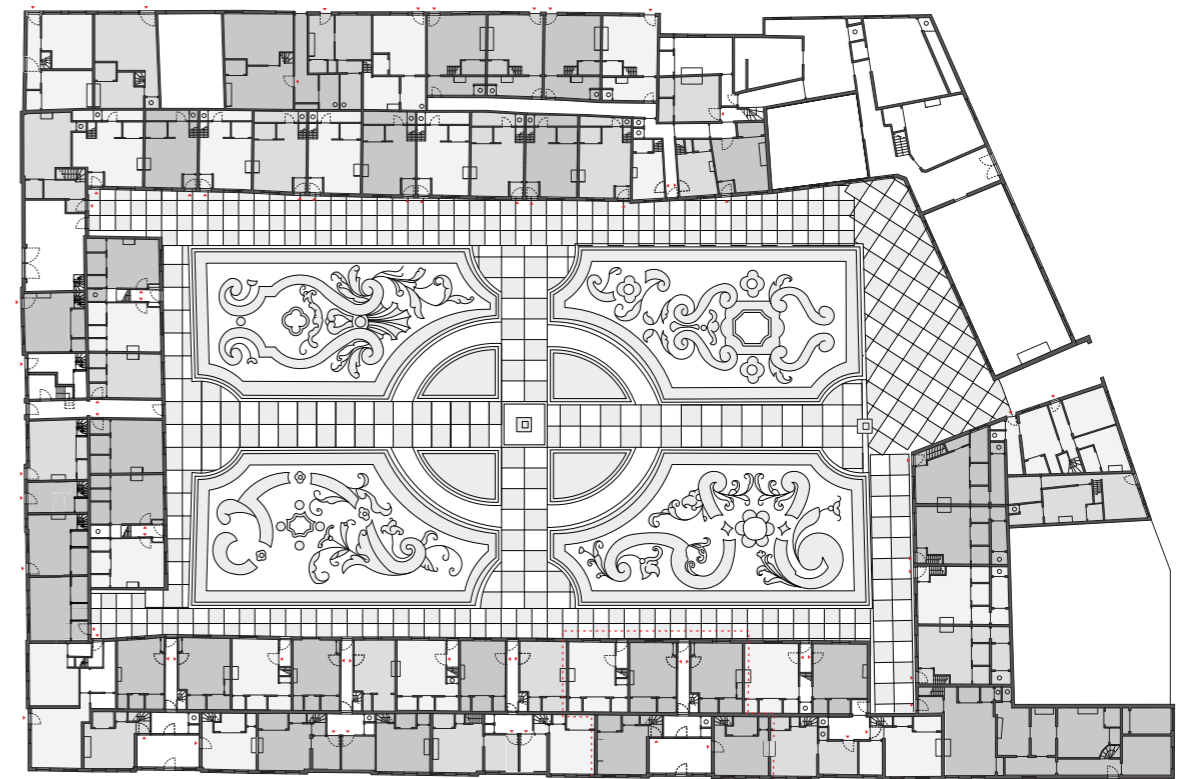


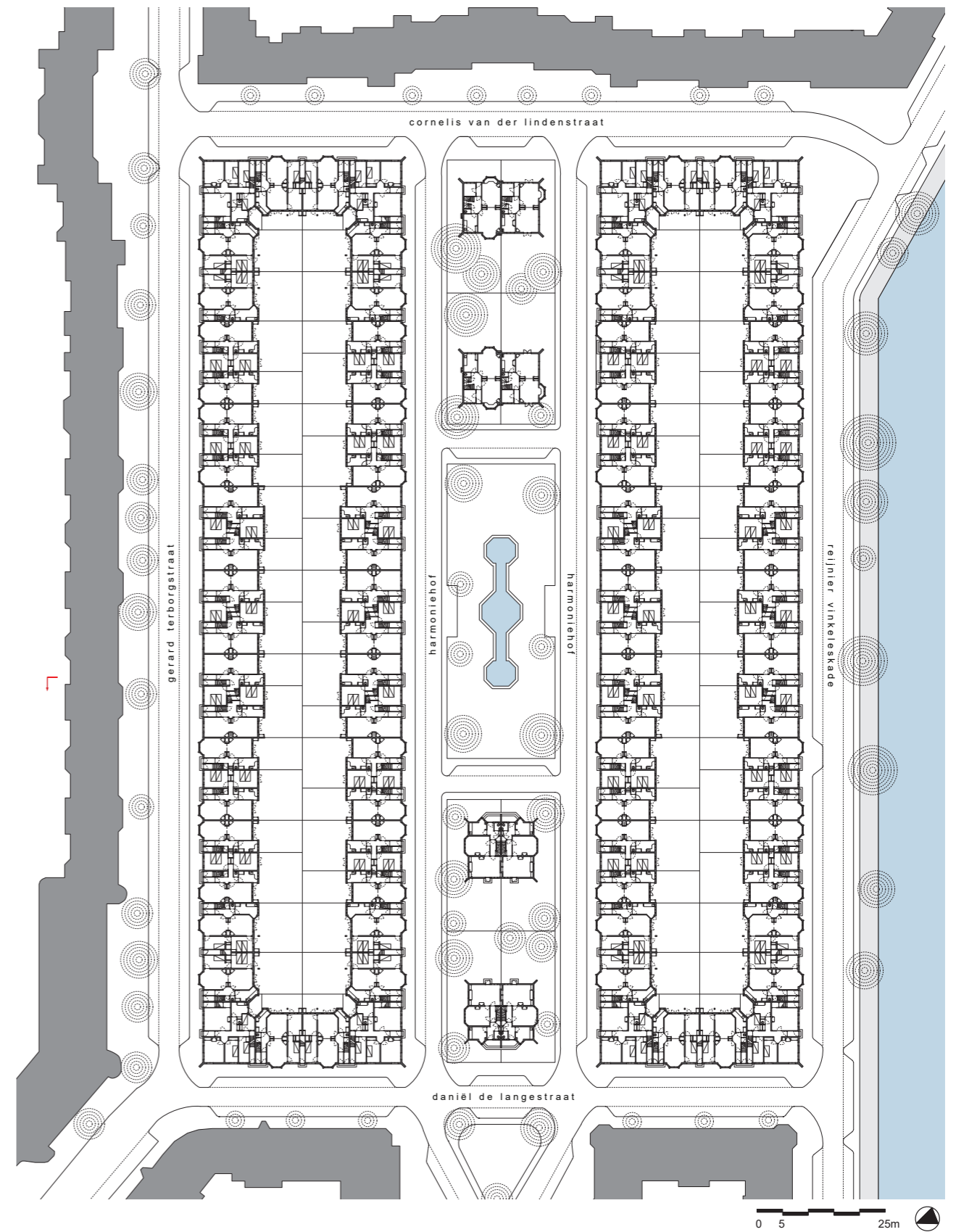




Fig 09 - Plantsoen Harmoniehof (September 2020)  
 (Source <https://osmimsterdam.nl/>)

### CASE STUDY FOUR

Harmoniehof, Amsterdam, 1922





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