

Interiors. Buildings. Cities

Susanne Pietsch

Sam De Vocht

Daniel Rosbottom

Jurjen Zeinstra

Mauro Parravicini

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THE BRIEF

A New Theatre for Delft



Delft is a Dutch city of approximately 110,000 inhabitants, located in the western part of the Netherlands. It is best known for its renowned technical university and its iconic Delft Blue porcelain. The historic city centre is relatively small yet lively, centred around a main square with the Nieuwe Kerk and a high density of monumental buildings. Like most Dutch cities, Delft is strongly oriented around cycling, although the compact city centre can easily be explored on foot.

One of Delft's most distinctive qualities is its proximity to two of the Netherlands' largest cities: The Hague and Rotterdam. Both cities can be reached within a 15 minute train ride and offer a wide range of cultural activities, institutions, and public facilities. Delft itself, however, lacks this level of cultural diversity. Aside from the university and the public library, the city has few large public buildings that can accommodate its growing population. Most buildings are privately owned and offer limited public space, a consequence of the city's fine grained urban fabric. Beyond the university and the library, the next significant public institution in Delft is the theatre. Since its construction in 1996, the theatre known as Theatre de Veste has become too small for a city of 110,000 inhabitants. The City of Delft

therefore envisions a new theatre that not only replaces the existing Theatre de Veste, but also engages more deeply with its citizens and society. The current theatre, located on the southern edge of the historic city centre, forms part of a cultural cluster together with a cinema and the library. It contains a single auditorium with a capacity of 500 seats arranged across two balconies, and a stage measuring 10 × 15 metres with a fixed proscenium opening of 12 metres.

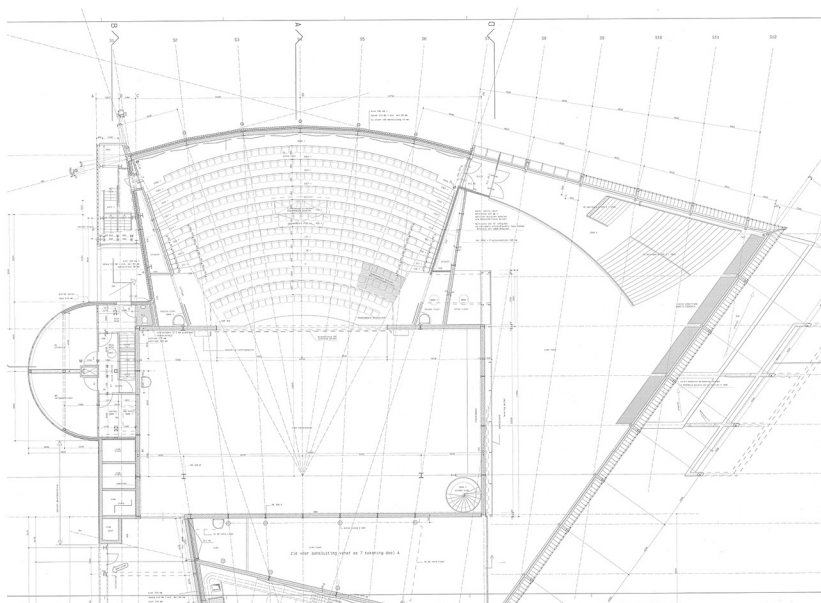
The new theatre is conceived as a significant expansion of this programme. It will include a main auditorium with approximately 800 seats, as well as a flexible Black Box Theatre designed to accommodate more experimental and diverse performances. At present, Theatre de Veste primarily functions as a receiving venue, mainly hosting music and comedy productions. However, the building itself is in poor condition and can no longer be realistically expanded. The current stage dimensions and backstage facilities limit the types of productions the theatre is able to accommodate. As a result,

several theatre companies are either unwilling or unable to perform in Delft due to these spatial and technical constraints. In addition, the theatre's heating system is outdated and expensive to operate. During the summer months, the cooling system is insufficient, forcing the theatre to suspend performances because the indoor climate becomes unsuitable for audiences and performers alike. These conditions make clear that the existing theatre must be replaced by a modern building of an appropriate scale and technical standard. Besides the technical requirement the theatre of the future wishes to become more prominent in the city of delft.

It is envisioned as more than just a performance venue. It should become a place where audiences can engage in dialogue about culture and society; where theatre intersects with other art forms; and where people from all backgrounds feel welcome and can find meaning. Performances should be able to take place throughout the building, creating a dynamic environment that is simultaneously festive and everyday, serious and playful.

The Brief proposed four sites to choose from in the Zuidpoort area of Delft. The chosen site for the new theatre is located along a pedestrian zone in the centre of Delft. It sits within a lively urban setting, surrounded by busy streets lined with small retail shops on the ground floor and residential units above. The site forms an urban Block containing eight buildings. On the northern corner of the site stands a HEMA department store, built and opened in 1972. Within the context of Delft's historic centre, it is a relatively large scale building. Additionally, the urban block contains three similarly designed buildings, each with retail spaces at street level and one or two storeys of privately owned housing above.

To the south of the HEMA building, a tall and slender structure marks the corner of the block and houses two fashion retailers. Architecturally, this area differs noticeably from Delft's historic centre. Instead of typical dutch narrow townhouses with pitched roofs, the urban fabric here is defined by longer and wider buildings with flat roofs. Despite this contrast in form, the materiality helps maintain a visual continuity with the surrounding historic city. This part of Delft reflects a particular moment in the city's urban development. The buildings were constructed following public protests against a proposed four-lane highway that would have cut through the historic centre.



THEATRE AND SOCIETY

Theatre's Impact On Society Through Time

Traditionally, theatre has been understood as a reflection of reality, offering audiences the pleasure of recognition. Dramatic theatre, with its emphasis on individual actions and conflicts, allows audiences to identify emotionally with characters and plotlines. While this can be deeply engaging, it often obscures the broader social, political, and economic structures that shape contemporary life. In classical theatre, audiences often experience emotional release and empathy, yet they are rarely encouraged to critically analyze the society that produces such narratives.

Theatre theorists like Bertolt Brecht proposed a radical rethinking of theatre's purpose, during the twentieth century. Brecht argued that theatre should not simply entertain or evoke passive emotion but should stimulate critical reflection and raise awareness of societal structures. Through his Epic Theatre, Brecht employed techniques such as the alienation effect, direct address to the audience, narrative interruptions, and visible stagecraft to prevent complete emotional immersion. By encouraging audiences to observe social, political, and economic realities with a critical eye, Brecht aimed to transform theatre into a vehicle for social and political education, empowering spectators to question inequality, injustice, and the systems that regulate their lives.

Complementing this critical approach, Peter Brook, an English theatre and film director, emphasized theatre as a living, immediate experience, focusing on the power of presence and interaction. In his work, *The Empty Space*, Brook identified four types of theatre: Dead, Holy, Rough, and Immediate. He categorizes them according to vitality, engagement, and connection with the audience. Brook's "Immediate Theatre" highlights the importance of direct, authentic engagement between performers and spectators. Minimal reliance on elaborate sets or props allows actors and audiences to inhabit the same space fully, creating a shared, dynamic experience. While Brecht prioritizes critical detachment, Brook prioritizes emotional and sensory involvement, showing that theatre can equally educate, move, and immerse through vitality and authenticity.

These theoretical legacies foster much of postdramatic theatre today, which often prioritizes presence, situation, and event over linear narrative. Contemporary theatre frequently blurs the boundaries between art and

reality, and between performers and spectators. Audience members may become participants, and performances may take place outside traditional theatre spaces, such as urban environments, public squares, or private homes. By doing so, theatre highlights its communal and interactive nature, emphasizing the shared experience of those present. This contemporary approach situates theatre as both representation and interaction, offering a space to explore social and political issues experientially, in real time, and in ways that challenge conventional storytelling. Importantly, contemporary theatre positions itself not merely as an aesthetic activity but as a social practice. It engages both intellectual and sensory perception, allowing audiences to experience stories, emotions, and perspectives in a direct and embodied way. Theatres live, shared situations allow viewers to either identify with or distance themselves from what they see on stage, fostering critical thinking, empathy, and the ability to form and articulate opinions. These skills are essential not only in cultural contexts but also in democratic societies. Theatre further supports language development, communication skills, and cultural literacy. By engaging with complex texts, narratives, and performances, audiences improve their understanding of language and meaning, connect with literary traditions, and reflect on their own lives in relation to others.

However, despite these strengths, theatre continues to face significant barriers. One of the most prominent issues is its lack of accessibility and inclusivity. Many people perceive theatre as elitist, formal, or intimidating. Social conventions such as expectations about dress codes or behaviour can create uncertainty, particularly among younger audiences or those without prior exposure. Additionally, economic barriers, such as ticket prices, further limit access for lower-income groups.

Another challenge is the competition with other forms of entertainment, such as film, streaming services, and digital media. Younger audiences, in particular, tend to prefer more easily accessible and familiar formats. As a result, theatre visits are often not part of their regular leisure activities. Surveys have shown that many young people simply choose alternatives like cinema or television, or feel that theatre does not speak to their interests or experiences.

Furthermore, theatre audiences often lack social and cultural diversity. Despite efforts to broaden participation, many institutions still struggle to attract people from different socio-economic backgrounds, as well as migrants or other underrepresented groups. This raises questions about whose stories are being told and who feels addressed by them.

In conclusion, theatre remains an essential cultural institution with a strong educational and social function. It fosters creativity, reflection, and dialogue, and has the potential to contribute meaningfully to individual and collective development. At the same time, it must confront ongoing challenges related to accessibility, perception, and changing audience habits. Addressing these issues is crucial if theatre is to remain relevant and inclusive in contemporary society.

From Bertolt Brecht's socially conscious Epic Theatre to Peter Brook's emphasis on immediacy and human presence, theatre has evolved to serve many functions: a mirror of society, a forum for public dialogue, a shared communal experience, and a tool for reflection. Its ability to foster empathy, encourage critical thinking, and stimulate meaningful conversations demonstrates that theatre is far more than a form of entertainment. It remains a living and socially relevant practice that enriches both cultural and civic life.

In this context, Theatre de Veste appears to face a significant challenge in its relationship with the local community. The building remains closed throughout the day and opens only shortly before performances begin. According to the theatre's management, limited financial resources make it impossible to keep the venue open during daytime hours for community activities or even to offer visitors the opportunity to meet, work, or enjoy a coffee in the foyer. As a result, the theatre functions primarily as a performance venue rather than as an active civic and cultural hub, limiting its potential to engage with the wider community beyond scheduled productions. Consequently, the theatre's accessibility extends beyond physical access and raises questions about social and cultural accessibility. By remaining closed for most of the day and only opening for ticketed events, the venue risks reinforcing the perception that theatre is reserved for those who are already familiar with its conventions and social norms.

This closed off model can create barriers for individuals who may not traditionally engage with theatre, reducing opportunities for spontaneous encounters, informal participation, and broader community involvement. As a result, the theatre becomes less accessible as a public cultural space and more exclusive to established audiences, limiting its capacity to serve as an inclusive gathering place for the diverse communities it seeks to represent.

CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

Scenography as a Tool for Shaping Experience

Theatre, in the past, relied on clear structures: a defined stage, a proscenium, a seated audience, and a distinction between performers and spectators. However, the understanding of how performance and scenography has shifted. Contemporary practices increasingly blur these boundaries, even though the traditional theater is still popular and used worldwide. Modern Performances are no longer confined to a specific location or format. Instead, it can take place in streets, abandoned buildings, public squares, or even digital environments. In these contexts, the audience is not always passive. They may move through spaces, interact with elements, or become part of the performance itself. This transformation challenges the conventional idea of theatre as something watched from a distance and replaces it with an experience that is immersive and participatory. When performances move beyond traditional stages, the environment itself becomes meaningful. A city street, for example, is no longer just a backdrop but an active component that shapes the event. The everyday world becomes theatrical, and performance becomes something embedded in real life rather than separate from it. As a result, scenography is no longer about decorating a stage but about organizing how people encounter and interpret a space.

Scenography has become a tool, system, and process. Rather than being limited to physical design elements like sets or props, scenography now refers to the way environments are structured to produce meaning and guide perception. It can involve visual, spatial, auditory, and even sensory elements working together to create an experience. In this expanded sense, scenography becomes a way of thinking. It helps explain how spaces influence behavior, emotions, and interpretation. A performance guides an audience's attention, similarly, festivals or political events use scenographic strategies to shape collective experience and communicate ideas.

Ultimately, these developments position scenography at the center of contemporary cultural practice. It is no longer just supportive or decorative but generative. It creates meaning rather than simply illustrating it. By shaping how people move through and perceive environments, scenography plays a crucial role in defining how experiences are constructed and understood in the modern world.

Juliet Rufford, a British researcher, emphasizes the interconnection between spatial design and performative experience.

Architecture is understood as inherently performative, in that it shapes movement, directs attention, and influences how individuals interact with one another and with their surroundings. From this perspective, the built environment can be seen as staging forms of social behaviour, much like theatre does.

While acknowledging the creative potential of interdisciplinary approaches between theatre and architecture, she also highlights how performative and scenographic strategies have been absorbed into contemporary economic and urban systems. In particular, the increasing use of theatrical techniques, such as spectacle, immersion, and participation, in the design of commercial and urban spaces. These strategies, are often employed to enhance consumer engagement and to transform environments into marketable experiences. As a result, cities and buildings can function as what Rufford describes as “brandscares,” where spatial design serves the interests of capital, tourism, and urban regeneration.

The incorporation of performance into architecture and urban design does not necessarily produce more meaningful or socially engaged experiences. Instead, it can contribute to processes of commodification, in which space is valued primarily for its economic potential. In this sense, the blurring of boundaries between theatre, architecture, and everyday life is not inherently progressive, but must be understood within broader political and economic frameworks.

At the same time, Rufford does not reject the intersection of theatre and architecture outright. Performance architecture projects where buildings are treated as sites of live experimentation, as well as collaborative approaches to theatre architecture that foreground process, participation, and adaptability use the tools of performance and scenography not to produce spectacle or commercial value, but to question and reconfigure existing social and spatial relations. In such cases, spatial design becomes a means of engaging with social, political, and cultural issues, rather than simply presenting an aesthetic experience. It is a complex and multifaceted concept within contemporary

performance and spatial design. It functions as a process that structures sensory and spatial experience, extending across disciplinary boundaries and into everyday life. At the same time, it raises critical questions about the role of design in shaping social relations and about the ways in which spatial practices can either reinforce or challenge existing structures. These developments suggest that the theatre of the future should no longer be conceived as a building organized around a single performance hall. Instead, it should function as a performative environment in which the entire building can become a stage. Its spatial structure should provide a variety of adaptable and inhabitable spaces that artists can appropriate, transform, and activate in different ways. Corridors, foyers, staircases, outdoor areas, and transitional spaces can all become sites of performance, interaction, and experimentation.

Such an approach aligns with contemporary understandings of theatre and scenography, where performance is no longer confined to a designated stage and spectators are encouraged to engage more actively with their surroundings. By extending performative potential throughout the building, theatre architecture can support immersive, participatory, and site responsive practices that challenge traditional distinctions between audience and performer. Rather than serving merely as a container for cultural events, the theatre itself becomes an active participant in the creation of meaning. In this way, the theatre of the future can move beyond the production of spectacle and instead foster new forms of social engagement, spatial exploration, and collective experience.

THEATRE IN CRISIS

Understanding Dutch Theatre Culture

The Dutch theatre sector has faced sustained pressure over the past decades, shaped by structural funding cuts, shifting cultural policies, and changing audience dynamics. These factors have made it increasingly difficult for theatres not only to survive, but also to innovate and develop for the future. This ongoing pressure has led to a gradual transformation of the sector's organisational and artistic priorities.

A major challenge lies in the reduction and restructuring of public funding. Since the early 2010s, government austerity measures have significantly decreased subsidies for the arts. These cuts have forced many theatres to operate with tighter budgets, reducing their capacity to take artistic risks, invest in new productions, or maintain long-term development strategies. Instead, institutions are often pushed toward short-term financial sustainability, prioritising ticket sales and efficiency over experimentation and cultural diversity.

At the same time, theatres are expected to broaden their social and cultural role. Audiences today have access to an unprecedented range of entertainment options, including streaming platforms, social media, festivals, and other live events which altered how people spend their leisure time. Cultural consumption has become more individualised, whereas theatre traditionally requires a fixed time, place, and a certain level of commitment. Unlike in the past, theatre is no longer a default or habitual activity for many people, but rather one option among many competing forms of entertainment. As a result, theatres must work harder to position themselves as relevant and meaningful within everyday life.

This shift is particularly visible among younger generations, who are less likely to engage with traditional theatre formats. At the same time, audiences have become more selective and experience-oriented. They are less inclined to attend performances out of routine and more motivated by unique, high-quality, or socially relevant events. This increases the pressure on theatres to curate distinctive programmes and to continuously justify the value of each visit.

The fragmentation of audiences makes it harder to maintain a stable and predictable visitor base. Instead of serving a relatively consistent public, theatres must now address multiple niche audiences with different

expectations and cultural backgrounds. This complicates programming decisions and can create tensions between accessibility and artistic identity. Today, theatres need to build long-term relationships with audiences, creating educational programmes, collaborating with local organisations, and experimenting with new formats that bridge the gap between performance and everyday life. However, these efforts require time, expertise, and financial resources which are limited due to funding constraints.

The pressure to demonstrate relevance can lead to safer programming choices, limiting innovation and making it harder for theatres to distinguish themselves artistically.

Funding cuts also affect the internal structure of theatre organisations. Staff reductions, increased workloads, and reliance on freelance labour have become common in the Netherlands. This precarisation weakens the sector's resilience and limits opportunities for emerging artists. Long-term artistic development, which depends on stability and continuity, becomes harder to sustain under these conditions.

Producing theatres are particularly vulnerable in this context. Unlike receiving houses, which primarily host touring productions, producing theatres are responsible for creating new work. This involves higher costs, including rehearsal spaces, technical staff, artistic teams, and longer production timelines. When funding decreases, these institutions are often forced to reduce the number of productions, scale down ambitions, or co-produce more frequently to share risks. This can limit artistic independence and experimentation.

Receiving houses, by contrast, operate with more flexibility. Their financial structure is less burdened by the high upfront costs associated with creation, such as rehearsals, artistic development, technical production, and long lead times. Instead, their expenses are more directly tied to programming and operations, allowing them to adjust more quickly to changing financial conditions or audience preferences. Their model is generally more resilient. This model enables receiving houses to curate programmes that respond to demand, trends, or local interests with relative ease. They can select from a wide range of existing productions and assemble a diverse schedule without the longterm commitments required by producing institutions.

The first of January 2013 may be considered a crisis moment in Dutch theatre politics. As of that date, substantial cuts in the national budgets available for theatre, and the arts at large, were implemented, amounting to a decrease of about 25% in public funding for theatre. The budget cuts should be considered a seismic shift in Dutch cultural policies as, until then, the cultural budget was always relatively spared in times of austerity measures. Now, the cuts on culture were twice as high as the general austerity measures, which amounted to about 10% of the national budget (Van Meerkerk and Van den Hoogen 2018). This chapter first presents some background information on the Dutch theatre policy, its legal underpinnings, and its arm's-length principle arrangements. Then the research method, which is based in the value sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), is presented, followed by a description of the outcomes of the empirical research and a discussion as to how they present a crisis.

However, they are still affected by funding cuts, particularly in terms of programming budgets and operational costs.

Dutch theatres face a complex set of challenges: reduced funding, increased societal expectations, changing audience behaviour, and organisational pressures. These factors collectively constrain their ability to innovate and grow. Producing theatres, due to their higher costs and creative responsibilities, are especially impacted, highlighting an imbalance within the sector that continues to shape its future.

THE GREAT GOOD PLACE

Ray Oldenburg, 1989

The following chapters frequently refer to the concept of the “third place,” which is central to this project. This idea was introduced by the American sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1932–2022) in his influential book *The Great Good Place*. In this work, Oldenburg created the term “third place” and defined it as a broad category of public environments that host regular, voluntary, informal, and enjoyable gatherings beyond the realms of home and work.

Oldenburg distinguishes between the “first place” (home) and the “second place” (work), positioning third places as essential settings that exist outside these primary spheres of daily life. In such spaces, individuals can set aside their responsibilities and concerns, and instead enjoy the presence, conversation, and company of others. Examples include cafes, bars, coffee shops, libraries, and community centres, as well as more informal venues such as taverns, general stores, or recreation halls. Through his work, Oldenburg demonstrates that these places have long been at the heart of public life, playing a vital role in supporting local democracy, social cohesion, and community vitality. These places either emerge organically over time shaped by the habits and routines of their users or can be intended „empty spaces“ designed to welcome people.

He characterises third places as neutral and inclusive environments that promote social equality by softening hierarchies between individuals. They are accessible, welcoming to strangers, and often shaped by a group of regular visitors who develop a sense of belonging and attachment to the space. Conversation is the primary activity, and the overall atmosphere is typically relaxed, playful, and informal. In this sense, third places function as a “home away from home,” offering psychological comfort and fostering a sense of community. Oldenburg also emphasises their broader social significance. Third places create opportunities for informal exchange and association, forming the foundation for civic engagement and collective life. They enable people to encounter one another across social, cultural, and economic differences, thereby strengthening the social fabric of a community. Without such spaces, social life becomes more fragmented and increasingly privatised, often limited to the repetitive cycle between home and work. As a result, the presence or absence of such spaces can



THE GREAT GOOD PLACE

CAFÉS, COFFEE SHOPS,
BOOKSTORES, BARS,
HAIR SALONS AND
OTHER HANGOUTS AT THE
HEART OF A COMMUNITY

RAY OLDENBURG

"Well-written, informative, and often entertaining."
—*Newark Star-Ledger*



significantly influence the overall quality of urban life.

However, not all public spaces fulfil the qualities of a true third place.

Spaces such as train stations, while publicly accessible, are rarely inviting or conducive to lingering. Likewise, many conventional third places come with certain barriers: cafés and bars often require consumption, while libraries may restrict social interaction through rules such as silence.

These limitations can reduce accessibility, particularly for those with fewer financial resources. For this reason, third places are especially important for individuals in more vulnerable living conditions. Families in smaller homes may depend on shared spaces where children can play freely, while people living alone may seek environments that alleviate isolation. Those residing in poorly designed housing may look for alternative places that offer comfort and social interaction. In particular, people with lower incomes benefit from spaces where they are welcome without the expectation of spending money. Similarly, immigrants or newcomers may rely on such environments to build connections and develop a sense of belonging within a new cultural context. Oldenburg's work extends beyond theory. Trained in sociology, with degrees from Mankato State University and the University of Minnesota, he spent much of his career as a professor at the University of West Florida. His approach was notably grounded in observation and everyday life, often engaging directly with communities rather than remaining within academic settings. He also collaborated with urban planners, cities, and organisations worldwide, advocating for the creation of spaces that strengthen social interaction and human connection.

The position of a third place within the urban fabric strongly determines its impact. They are often situated along everyday routes, at key intersections, or within mixed-use areas where different social groups naturally intersect. Their success depends on accessibility, visibility, and permeability, allowing people to enter easily and appropriate the space in their own way. In this sense, they act as connective tissue within the city, linking private and public life while reinforcing a sense of local identity. When carefully integrated, they can activate underused areas and contribute to a more vibrant and resilient urban environment. In architecture and urban design, the concept of the third place highlights the importance of creating environments that

extend beyond their primary function. Designs should incorporate inclusive and socially embedded spaces that invite people to spend time there throughout the day, engage in conversation, and participate in cultural exchange. In this way, the building becomes part of everyday urban life, a place where culture, community, and social interaction intersect. Theaters have significant potential to incorporate third spaces into their programming. These buildings are often situated in prime locations within city centers and are publicly funded, making a strong case for their accessibility to a broad audience.

Across Europe, many public buildings, including theaters, have integrated third spaces into their programs. While some were intentionally designed to function as third places, others gradually evolved in this direction in order to remain accessible, relevant, and financially sustainable. The Theater Basel provides an important successful example, as it was not originally designed as a third space. Built in 1970, it initially fulfilled a conventional theatrical function. Like many theaters, it faced challenges such as reduced funding and declining visitor numbers. In response, it introduced a more open and accessible public program. Located in the city center between the town hall and the train station, the theater is directly connected to the Tinguely Fountain, which transforms the outdoor forecourt into a public space for art. The fountain was built between 1975 and 1977 on the site of the former city theater stage and was designed by the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely. Its ten kinetic figures, arranged like performers on a stage, continuously enact an ever-changing spectacle, blurring the line between sculpture and performance. In this way, theatricality extends beyond the building itself into the urban space, inviting passersby to engage with art in their everyday environment. The theater now opens its doors daily, offering a foyer with a bar, reading areas, children's spaces, and a large open zone that accommodates performances, discussions, and informal gatherings. This transformation has successfully increased both visitor numbers and revenue.

In close proximity to Delft, Amare in The Hague, by contrast, was designed from the outset as a multifunctional cultural hub and a contemporary "third space." It houses multiple venues, including a dance theater, a concert hall,

and a smaller multifunctional hall associated with a university. While it operates as a receiving house, it incorporates educational functions, with a music school occupying the upper floors for both children and higher education students, although these areas are not publicly accessible.

A defining feature of Amare is its foyer, which is conceived as an extension of the public realm. The foyer is long and positioned directly along a pedestrian zone, with a fully glazed facade that allows passersby to look inside, visually connecting the interior with the city. With entrances at both ends, it functions as a passage as well as a destination, reinforcing its role as an extension of the street. A large, multifunctional staircase serves not only as a circulation element but also as informal seating, enabling visitors to gather and observe performances taking place within the foyer itself. These performances can either be set against the backdrop of the city, or framed through the use of curtains. A ceiling-mounted lighting rig further supports this adaptability, allowing the space to shift between everyday use and staged events.

Adjacent to the main foyer is the “market square,” a more intimate and flexible area that supports a variety of informal and community oriented activities. This space can host flea markets, study areas, relaxation zones, children’s play areas, open mic sessions, as well as yoga and dance classes. the new theater for delft should aim to incorporate similar spaces in order to respond to its accessibility and engagement.

The City of Delft could benefit from a third space similar to the two described. One that feels relaxed and inviting, located in the heart of Delft, and accessible to everyone.



PEOPLES PALACE

Where Culture Belongs To Everyone

The concept of the “People’s Palace” originates in the nineteenth century as part of broader social reform movements in industrialising Europe, particularly in Britain. It emerged from a growing concern with urban poverty, limited access to education, and the need to provide cultural and recreational opportunities for the working classes. Rather than being a formalised theoretical framework attributed to a single author, the “People’s Palace” is best understood as a civic and architectural ideology. The idea that cultural institutions such as museums, libraries, and performance spaces should function as accessible, educational, and morally uplifting environments for all members of society.

One of the earliest and most significant examples of this concept is the People’s Palace in East London, opened in 1887 in the Mile End area. It was developed in response to the dense industrial population of the East End and was strongly influenced by Victorian philanthropic and reformist thinking. The institution combined education, entertainment, and social reform under one roof, offering lecture halls, exhibitions, a library, swimming baths, and spaces for music and public gatherings. Its founding vision was to provide “rational recreation,” a term used in the nineteenth century to describe activities that were both enjoyable and morally and intellectually beneficial. In this sense, the People’s Palace was not merely a building but a social project aimed at improving civic life and fostering self-improvement among the working classes.

The theoretical foundations of the People’s Palace can be linked to broader Victorian ideologies of progress, public morality, and education. Thinkers and reformers of the period believed that access to culture and knowledge could help reduce social inequality and promote social cohesion. Architecture played a central role in this ambition, as buildings were seen as instruments for shaping behaviour and guiding social development. The People’s Palace thus reflected a belief in the transformative power of space. Carefully designed environments could elevate individuals both intellectually and morally.

However, the concept was never without contradiction. While the People’s Palace was intended as a democratic space, it was also shaped by paternalistic assumptions about the working class. Access to culture was often

structured through institutional control, with clearly defined rules, educational agendas, and moral expectations. The building provided access, but within boundaries determined by reformers and civic authorities.

Over time, the idea of the People's Palace evolved beyond its Victorian origins. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it has been reinterpreted within architectural, cultural, and theoretical discourse as a model for civic accessibility and public space. Contemporary discussions often use the term more critically, questioning whether cultural institutions truly function as open and democratic spaces or whether they remain shaped by economic, institutional, and social barriers. In this expanded interpretation, the People's Palace becomes less a specific building type and more a conceptual framework for thinking about the relationship between architecture, culture, and society.

Today, the relevance of the People's Palace lies in its ability to frame ongoing debates about accessibility, public engagement, and the social role of cultural institutions. It raises important questions about who has access to cultural spaces, how often these spaces are open, and whether they function as active parts of everyday civic life or remain restricted to scheduled events. As such, the concept continues to inform contemporary architectural and scenographic thinking, particularly in discussions about how cultural buildings might become more integrated into the social fabric of the city. The idea of a "People's Palace" is supported by the concept of the "third place," which provides a useful framework for understanding how such a model can function in practice. A third place refers to informal public environments that exist beyond home and work, offering space for social interaction, community engagement, and shared experience. In this sense, the theatre of the future, as a cultural building funded through public taxation, should be accessible to everyone who contributes to it. In return, it should actively serve the public rather than remaining restricted to ticketed performances alone. By opening its doors more consistently, theatre can shift from being an exclusive cultural product to a more inclusive urban space, where culture is not hidden behind a financial barrier but becomes part of everyday social life. The theatre should be capable of hosting several forms of art and engaging with diverse cultural expressions. It should

provide space for cultural exchange and interaction. This is particularly relevant in the Netherlands, and in Delft specifically, where many international residents come to study or work. The city also has a large population of young people who may not be able to afford expensive events or who do not prioritise cultural activities in their daily lives. The theatre should therefore offer activities and spaces that attract people from all social classes and generations, to bring culture into their lives.



FINDING ITS PLACE

Exploring the four sites



The location for the new Theater de Veste was not predetermined. Instead, four different sites were offered for consideration within the Zuidpoort area of Delft. Each site has its own distinct character and spatial qualities.

The first potential site was Gasthuisplaats, located in the western part of Zuidpoort. The site contains a former hospital building, while the remainder is largely open and is planned to be transformed into a park. However, this location presented significant challenges due to its delicate urban grain. On one side of the site, residential buildings with very narrow facades, approximately 4 to 6 metres wide and as low as 4 metres in height, create a highly sensitive context. Introducing a large-scale theatre element, such as a 30 metre fly tower, felt inappropriate in relation to this scale. Another major constraint was the presence of residential windows facing directly onto the site, meaning that all residents would overlook the new building, leaving no opportunity for blind or secondary elevations. In addition, truck access was extremely limited, and the site also carries significant historical value, including archaeological excavations beneath it. Together, these factors made the site difficult to develop.

The second option was the existing location of Theater de Veste. This site, however, appeared relatively small compared to the other proposals and offered limited possibilities for expansion. As a result, it seemed unsuitable for accommodating a significantly larger theatre programme.

The parking area in the eastern part of Zuidpoort was also considered for an extended period. This site offered strong potential for a more iconic building, slightly removed from the immediate everyday flow yet still within walking distance of Delft's city centre. However, further analysis revealed a lack of daily activity in the area, despite its proximity to the pedestrian zone. In addition, the irregular and fragmented edges of the site made it difficult to establish a clear spatial orientation and coherent urban structure.

The final proposed site aligned most closely with the overall approach of the project. Located within a highly frequented pedestrian zone, it offered the opportunity for the theatre to become a genuinely public building. The existing HEMA department store, with its large structural footprint and strong visitor flow, already acts as an urban attractor and provides a strong

foundation for expanding the theatre programme into a more integrated cultural destination. In comparison to the other sites, the surroundings have little historical value and are not part of the characteristic, picturesque Delft housing fabric. The area feels like it could benefit from improvement, yet there is also very little of significant value that would be lost or disrupted. There are no nearby buildings of high historical importance that require special preservation or careful intervention. Truck access appears straightforward and logical, as the site already accommodates several shops that receive daily deliveries.

THE CITY OF DELFT

Urban Development of Zuidpoort, 1830 – today

To understand the site and its surroundings a look into the past is required. The site underwent major changes while Delft was losing many of its beautiful historic buildings. The site is located in the Zuidpoort area of Delft. North of the main Rijn-Schie Canal, within the city center.

In 1837, Delft was a small, impoverished city of about 15,000 inhabitants. It had rich architectural heritage but was economically stagnant. However, the Zuidpoort area embodied both the historic charm and potential for change that would later emerge. The modernization of the Rijn-Schie Canal initiated further redevelopment, reshaping Delft's relationship with its waterways and creating new city "islands." The southern area became industrial, while the north evolved into a parkland called Nieuwe Plantage.

By the 1920s-1930s, urban planning became more theoretical and aesthetic, focusing on city unity and regional integration rather than isolated development. Between the wars, ideas shifted from functional traffic designs to monumental and aesthetic visions of urban cohesion. Delft's Zuidpoort area stagnated somewhat amid these grander ambitions.

After World War II, Delft suffered economic loss. The 1950 Structural Plan introduced the "Organic City" concept, treating Delft as a cohesive organism of functional layers such as traffic, housing and green space.

At the end of the 1960s, the rigid principles of Functionalism in urban planning began to be questioned. Debates initiated by urban planner Harm de Vries and traffic expert Peter Hakkesteeft, regarding the proposed highway route crossing Delft from north to south from Rijswijk to Schiedam through the future Tanthof residential area, highlighted the need for alternative solutions. A simple diversion along the railroad could create space for a large landscape park, introducing ecology as a new planning consideration. The traditional themes of a "habitable city" and "reparation of the urban tissue" were no longer sufficient to capture the broader urban and political discussions taking place.

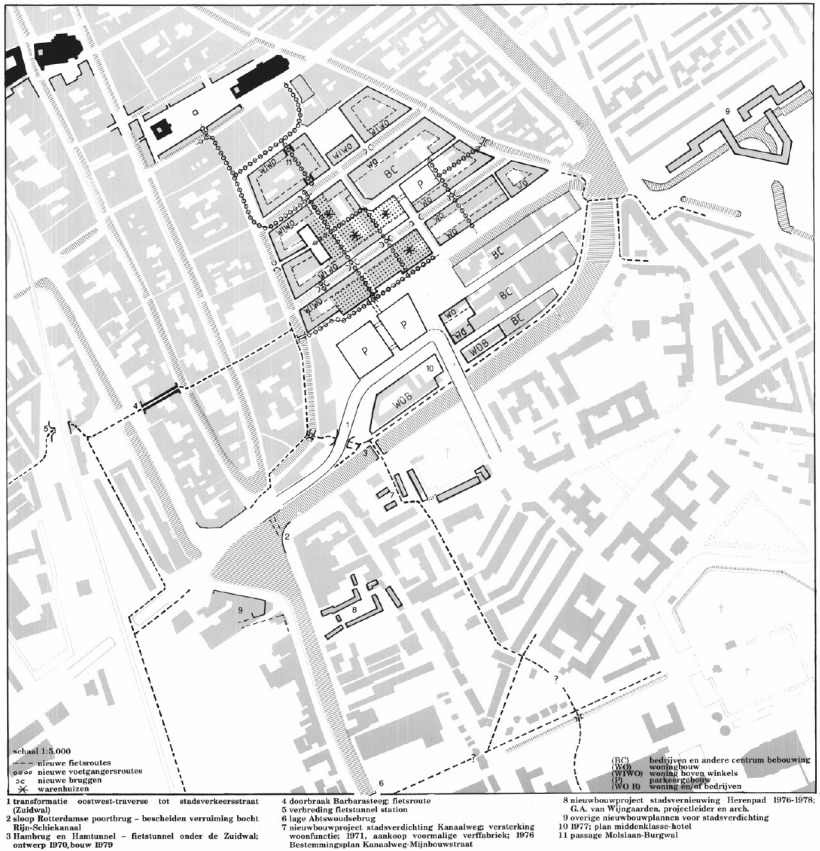
New priorities emerged, including ecological concerns, public participation, attention to the architectural culture of the city, and a shift from quantity and prosperity toward quality and well-being. These themes translated into concrete urban strategies. The development of new housing types, preservation of historical and recreational spaces, mixed-use (live, work, play)

planning for better functioning districts, increased building density in city centers, prioritization of pedestrians, cyclists, and public transport, and the restriction of motor traffic in residential areas were part of the urban strategy. Delft even became known for pioneering street designs that integrated traffic into neighborhood life.

The younger generation of architects in Delft at that time, influenced by teachers such as Aldo van Eyck and Herman Herzberger, challenged Functionalism from a pragmatic perspective. While earlier critics argued that Functionalism was inhuman, the new critique emphasized that Functionalism could be aesthetically pleasing but failed to function effectively in complex urban contexts. They drew inspiration from Christopher Alexander's 1965 essay *A City is Not a Tree*, which advocated for non-hierarchical urban structures and process-driven planning. According to Alexander, urban form should emerge from rules rather than rigid design, allowing flexibility, adaptability, and optimal social outcomes.

This approach was reflected in projects such as In de Veste and Tanthof. In these developments, finely meshed networks for pedestrians and cyclists were integrated into the historic city fabric, with mixed-use buildings preventing the isolation of commercial and residential functions. In conjunction to the finely meshed tissue an attempt was made to give the large department stores a piece where they wouldn't interfere with the structure. They were reintegrated into the buildings along the canals and the walking paths. Accumulations of stores around parking lots were avoided. The department store the Hema, for instance, was willing to negotiate about a building site that was unfavorable in regard to traffic provisions, but refused to consider a housing programme which would be built on top of and around the store. The Hema building was opened in 1976 with a festive ceremony. The building accommodated a bakery, a full size Hema restaurant and its retail shop. During the opening, the streets were filled with people, marching bands walked the city and a zeppelin with a banner was flying above the city. Hema was truly celebrated by the people of Delft. It became a meeting point for the residents. To this day the Hema sits in that location and hasn't changed its appearance.

Urban form was deliberately flexible: deviations from planning rules were



encouraged to create spatial variety and avoid monotony. The planning process through negotiation between the municipality and agents determined much of the outcome, rather than fixed forms.

At the level of urban zoning, the Compact City concept guided development, while traffic plans were rethought. Highway projects that would disrupt landscapes or the urban fabric were canceled or rerouted, and a comprehensive system of bike paths was introduced, sometimes requiring new tunnels and bridges.

The Zuidpoort area was transformed into a public transport hub connected to the inner city, reflecting a shift toward accessibility and human-centered mobility in contrast to a previous motor-centred mobility.

Overall, the late 1960s and 1970s marked Delft's transition from Functionalism to a process-oriented planning philosophy. This new approach emphasized ecology, public participation, mixed-use development, and adaptive urban forms, with urban spaces emerging from rules and negotiations rather than pre-determined designs. Today, the idea of mixed use still persists. Streets are lined with ground-floor shops and housing above, while larger buildings and retail functions are integrated throughout, creating a dense urban fabric. The historic city center is entirely car-free and accessible only to pedestrians and cyclists, continuing the 1960s vision of human-centered mobility.



AS FOUND

Analysis of the site and its surroundings

Theater de Veste, the existing theater in Delft, is located on the southern edge of the city's historic center. Due to limited capacity and the poor condition of the building, the city of Delft wishes to develop a new venue with a larger seating capacity and an additional venue in the form of a Black Box Theater.

The site selected for the new Theater of the Future is located approximately 150 meters northeast of its current location. Both Theater de Veste and the proposed new site are situated within the previously explained redevelopment area of Zuidpoort. The surrounding buildings were constructed in the 1960/1970s as part of Delft's new urban plan.

The central idea behind the redevelopment of Delft's city center was to introduce a mixed-use structure, with small shops on the ground floor and housing above. In between the mixed-use structure the bigger retail stores found their place. Following the demolition of all buildings in the Zuidpoort area, the urban grain in this part of the city became significantly larger compared to its historic surroundings. The newly constructed buildings differ in scale and structure from the fine-grained historic buildings that previously occupied the site.

The theatre of the future lies between two city squares the Bastiaansplein and the Besteenmarkt. Bastiaansplein is a highly frequented urban square, characterized by modern high-rise buildings and a high volume of pedestrian and bicycle traffic. The square attracts visitors due to the presence of the two large supermarkets, the public library, a huge underground parking facility, as well as retail stores.

In contrast the Besteenmarkt, which is just outside of the redevelopment area of the 1950s, is an intimate and atmospheric square located in the heart of Delft's historic center. It is surrounded by small, traditional dutch brick buildings with pitched roofs and is defined by numerous mature trees and a lively concentration of bars and restaurants. The center of the square functions as a shared terrace for the surrounding establishments and comes alive especially in the evening, when the entire square becomes animated and vibrant. The Delft public library serves as the connecting element between the old and the new site, with both corners of the building oriented toward it. The library is an important building in Delft and follows

an approach that is similar to the idea of the theatre of the future. It is called “OPEN,” and it lives up to its name. The library hosts a wide range of activities and programmes in line with the concept of a contemporary library. It collaborates with various institutions in Delft that focus on education and the arts, and it includes a café, a shop, study spaces, and numerous workshop rooms that can be rented or used for regular events and activities. From my own experience, the library is a well established and highly frequented building in Delft. It is often so busy that its primary function as a library can sometimes feel secondary.

The site for the Theater of the Future is located within a pedestrian zone, making it highly accessible for everyday use. Cars and other vehicles are not allowed to drive in this area except for delivery purposes. The northern and southern edges of the plot are bordered by canals, while the eastern and western sides are defined by buildings that combine retail functions on the ground floor with residential units above.

On the western side of the block, a long and narrow building accommodates a large retail store. This structure is the most recent addition to the block and has undergone several facade modifications over time in response to changes in use and programme. Its architectural language differs significantly from that of the other buildings within the block as well as from its immediate surroundings. The facade consists of atypical design elements, such as circular windows that appear more decorative than functional, and the use of polished grey stone. The brick has been painted white, creating a strong contrast with the surrounding red-brick buildings.

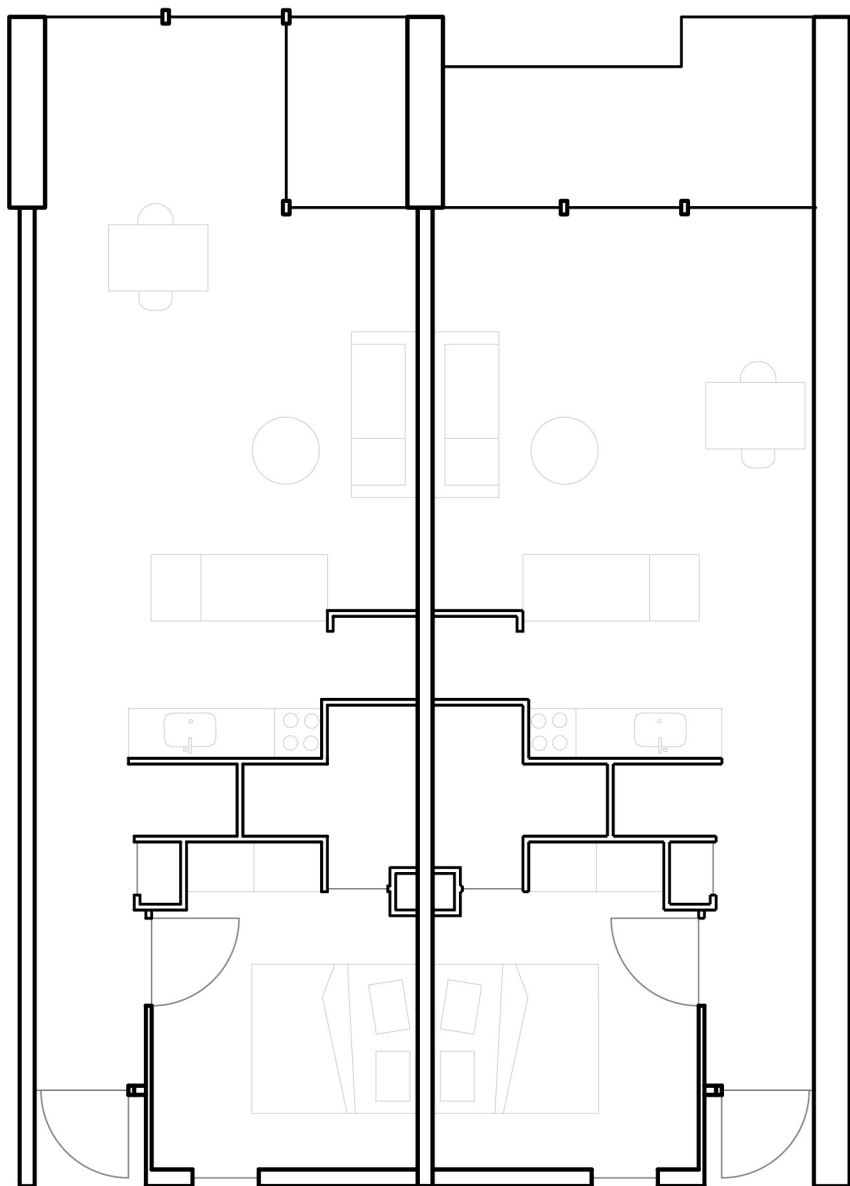
All remaining buildings within the block share a consistent architectural language. They are constructed in red brick and express a strong linearity. Brick columns are articulated in the facades, with the columns projecting approximately 60 cm to create a vertical rhythm. The three buildings that contain residential units on the upper floors feature repetitive facades alternating between windows and balconies. Horizontally, a cantilevered anopy runs just above the shopfronts at a height of approximately four meters, introducing a strong continuous line in the facade composition. The apartments on the upper floors extend across the full width of the buildings, providing one facade facing the pedestrian zone or canal and



another facing the inner courtyard, which functions as a parking and delivery area. Much of this courtyard is covered by a low-rise storage structure attached to the large retail building. even thugh the volume is quiet low compared to the other buidligs it creates a rather unpleasant view for the residents into the courtyard.

The apartment layouts are relatively simple, consisting of elongated rectangular units approximately 5 meters wide and 14 meters deep. Access to the apartments is from the courtyard. Residents enter at ground level from the street, through a secured door and ascend via a staircase to the first floor, where they exit the thermal envelope and reach a long, exposed external gallery serving all units. These galleries function purely as circulation spaces and offer no additional amenity. Upon entering an apartment from the courtyard side, the bedroom is located immediately adjacent to the entrance and faces the courtyard. The kitchen and bathroom occupy the central zone of the plan and do not receive direct daylight. The living room is positioned on the side facing the pedestrian zone, featuring a continuous window band extending across the width of the unit. Each apartment includes a small private balcony. All units are mirrored across the shared load bearing wall separating adjacent apartments. On the ground floor of these apartment buildings, retail units are arranged within the same structural grid. The grid consists of 30 cm × 30 cm columns spaced 4.5 m apart, with the shops occupying the spaces between the columns. Each unit varies in size, adapting to the grid while maintaining a cohesive structural logic.

The HEMA building follows a strong linearity in its design. It has very few openings and is entirely clad in red brick, which is slightly lighter and more orange in tone than that of the surrounding buildings. The facade is carefully detailed, featuring subtle ornamental brick projections that articulate its surface. These elements follow a clear rhythm and gradually diminish from the upper floors to the ground floor: the third floor displays the highest density of projecting lines, the second floor features them only at every third interval, and at ground level only the primary structural expression remains visible. These elements follow a clear rhythm and gradually diminish from the upper floors to the ground floor: the third floor displays the highest density of projecting lines, the second floor features them



only at every third interval, and at ground level only the primary structural expression remains visible. The composition is completed by horizontal lintel-like brick bands that run continuously across the entire facade.

The layout of the HEMA building is organized on a 9.6 m × 9.6 m structural grid, supported by mushroom columns with a diameter of 60 cm. Both the ground floor and the first floor have a clear height of 4.3 m and cover approximately 1,600 m² each. The third floor is slightly smaller, measuring around 900 m², and is supported by regular columns aligned to the same grid. Its ceiling height is lower at 3.3 m.

An existing vertical core containing a lift and stairwell is located on the east side of the building and provides the main vertical circulation. The HEMA currently has two entrances, one on the north façade and one on the south. Adjacent to the southern entrance are two escalators leading to the first floor. However, these are no longer in use, as the first floor is currently unoccupied.

When the HEMA first opened in the 1970s, it occupied the entire building. At that time, the store offered much more than retail alone. HEMA functioned as a true department store in the city centre. It included a bakery on the third floor, where all pastries and bread were produced, a large restaurant on the first floor, and only the ground floor was dedicated to retail.

When HEMA introduced a lunchroom in 1926, many people considered it a risky decision. At the time, female service staff were unusual, and eating out was not common for the “ordinary” citizen due to financial constraints. However, the lunchroom became a surprising success. By offering coffee for a dime and affordable hot meals such as a simple menu of soup, meat, vegetables, and dessert for fifty cents HEMA made it possible for many Dutch people to eat out for the first time in their lives. From the beginning, HEMA defined itself through affordability, quality, and accessibility, aiming to bring people together. Its success was rooted in large, open layouts, simple design, and straightforward food. Over time, HEMA gradually outsourced its baking operations, and the second floor was converted into storage. The restaurant also declined and eventually disappeared. Today, the HEMA in Delft contains only a small, rather hidden dining area located in a



dark corner of the store, which feels uninviting and disconnected from the rest of the building. After the restaurant closed, the first floor was mainly rented out to third parties until recently. At present, the space is empty and no longer in use by HEMA or other tenants.

In recent years, the company has reported increasing sales after a difficult period during and before the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past three years, its performance has improved, and it has shifted its internal concept. In 2026, HEMA celebrated its 100th anniversary and introduced a new initiative called HEMA100. With this concept, the company redesigned its product range, focusing more strongly on food, improved quality, and refined design. It has also made significant investments in its restaurant operations.

However, its core identity remains unchanged: offering affordable food in a fast, accessible format. HEMA continues to position itself as a store for all social classes, while adapting to contemporary expectations by introducing healthier options and food that aligns with different dietary needs. The overall layout of the new HEMA100 restaurant has remained similar to its original concept. It operates as a self-service system, with spacious seating that functions like a communal dining hall. Visitors can easily enter the space and take a break without necessarily consuming anything.

The HEMA store in Delft has not yet been updated according to this new concept and is therefore overdue for renovation in order to remain competitive and continue attracting customers. The interior currently feels outdated compared to other refurbished HEMA locations.

The core philosophy of HEMA aligns strongly with the proposed approach for the theatre of the future. Its aim of bringing people together through affordability, accessibility, and a celebration of simplicity resonates directly with the idea of a publicly oriented cultural building.

It therefore makes sense to connect the HEMA program with the theatre of the future, fostering dialogue between the two functions and making the theatre more accessible to a wider audience who might not usually enter a theatre building. In this way, the theatre can benefit from the presence and public character of the HEMA store. To ensure a strong mutual relationship in which both functions reinforce one another, the transition between the two should be seamless and inviting. The theatre foyer should spark



curiosity in the average HEMA customer and provide a welcoming space where people can feel comfortable.



BETWEEN CITY AND STAGE

Matter of Scale, Where Space Performs

The relationship between the city and the stage was explored through a physical model. The aim was to communicate an atmosphere by representing the transition from the city into the stage space. The model did not seek to depict an existing scene or structure.

This investigation resulted in two distinct models, exploring how space can be shaped through performance, a continuous interplay of scale, materiality, and perception.

The first model focused strongly on the dimensions and characteristics of objects. Theatre is often a secluded experience, largely hidden from the surrounding city. Confined within designated performance spaces, it can feel detached from everyday life. Yet theatre has the unique ability to transform scale and perception. Within a single room, an entirely different world can emerge. Entering a theatre can feel like stepping into an alternative reality, one that is temporarily removed from the ordinary and concealed from the outside world.

This concept is explored through a model that investigates the blurring of scale and spatial perception while creating distinct atmospheres within a single environment. The performance space is defined by four freestanding walls that never fully meet, allowing light and movement to pass through the gaps between them. At the centre, the stage is positioned without a clearly defined boundary. Instead, a subtle curved step gently divides the room into two zones. This step can function as a threshold between performer and audience, or become part of the performance itself.

The walls seem monumental thick, heavy, and imposing in height. Constructed from gypsum, they appear cold and dense, reinforcing their solidity and making visitors feel small in comparison. Their monumentality distorts the perception of scale, creating an atmosphere that feels both overwhelming and ambiguous.

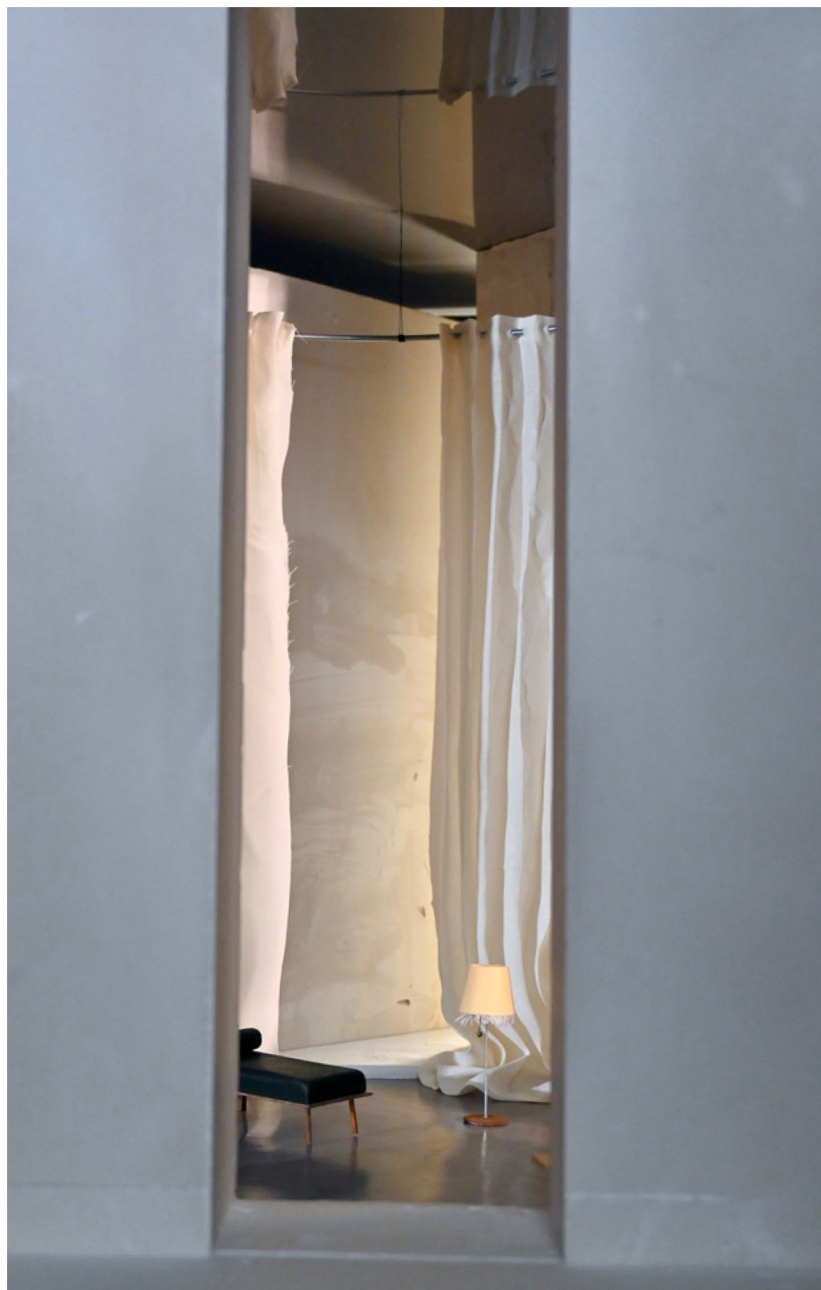
The space is shared equally by audience and performers. Upon entering, the floor material shifts from a light coloured surface, matching the walls, to a darker, slightly reflective grey finish that captures light and reflects stage props, distinguishing what is inside the performative space and what is outside.

The space has no fixed orientation. Any opening may serve as an entrance

or become part of the performance itself. Curtains positioned in front of the walls allow certain openings to be concealed, enabling the space to be continuously reconfigured. The curtains are hung from the wall and are placed at a lower height to reveal the walls behind it, when fully closed. Their circular arrangement echoes the curved step, softening the rigid geometry of the walls and reshaping the spatial experience. This interplay heightens the contrast between the heavy, linear walls and the soft, fluid curtains. Above, a highly reflective ceiling visually unifies the space and introduces further ambiguity. Where the walls meet the ceiling, the room appears to extend infinitely upward. In contrast, where the walls stop short of the ceiling, they seem to float within the space, contradicting their apparent weight and solidity.

Another layer of contrast emerges through the curtains themselves. Although lightweight white fabric is typically associated with airiness and movement, here the curtains rest heavily on the floor, conveying an unexpected sense of weight and grounding. Within the context of performance, they also serve an acoustic function, softening and shaping the sound within the room.

The minimal nature of the space allows it to host a wide variety of performances and atmospheres. Through the introduction of only a few pieces of furniture placed at the centre — a simple daybed and a standing lamp — the space becomes unexpectedly intimate. Soft, warm light filters in from behind the walls, creating curiosity about what lies beyond and how far the space continues. This gentle illumination enhances the feeling of intimacy, transforming the massive enclosing walls from something imposing into something almost protective, as though they are embracing the space.



Lighting and props have the ability to completely transform the atmosphere of the space, despite the architecture itself remaining unchanged. Because the environment is minimal and abstract, even subtle interventions can dramatically alter the emotional experience and perception of the room. Light becomes an architectural element in itself, capable of reshaping the mood, depth, and scale of the space.

In contrast to the previous, coloured or directional lighting can completely destabilise this intimacy. A deep red glow transforms the same space into something theatrical, unsettling, and ambiguous. Shadows intensify, reflections become more pronounced, and the scale of the walls feels exaggerated and oppressive. The reflective ceiling amplifies this effect, allowing light to spread endlessly upward and making the room feel immersive and disorienting. What once felt calm and domestic suddenly becomes dramatic, ritualistic, or even uncanny.

Props play an equally important role in redefining the atmosphere. Because the space is intentionally sparse, each object gains significance and has the power to suggest an entirely different narrative. A single stool placed in the centre can evoke isolation and tension, while soft furnishings can create intimacy and comfort. The minimal nature of the setting allows props to act almost symbolically, where even the smallest intervention can shift the emotional reading of the space.

Together, light and props continuously reconfigure the perception of the theatre. They allow the same architectural environment to host vastly different experiences, transforming the space from intimate to monumental, from calm to unsettling, and from domestic to theatrical.



The second model investigates the preception of space. Blurring the boundary between reality and theatrical performance can be achieved not only through the content of a play, but through the spatial conditions in which the performance takes place. Every space holds a distinct character, shaped by light, materials, and spatial organisation. The perception of space is subjective and can be transformed through the presence of people, the furniture, light, time of day, sound, and temperature. These elements continuously interact, making space dynamic rather than fixed, and allowing it to shift between the ordinary and the performative.

In theater, space is often carefully designed and adapted to convey a specific idea or artistic vision. However, performance today is no longer confined to the traditional proscenium stage. It can emerge anywhere within everyday environments, transitional zones, or architecturally ambiguous settings. The challenge, therefore, lies in creating atmospheres that may contrast with the inherent qualities of a given space. The intervention introduces tension and strangeness, encouraging the audience to question their perception and awareness of their surroundings. This approach aligns with contemporary theater practices, where scenography is no longer a neutral backdrop but an active agent in shaping meaning and experience.

The space is not immediately legible. It reveals depth, ambiguity, and a lack of clearly defined boundaries. New materials are introduced, including soft curtains and a reflective, delicate floor, which contrastcontrast with the exterior. This deliberate ambiguity introduces a sense of unfamiliarity that both challenges and engages the audience.

Walls that appear thick and massive from the outside are revealed to be hollow, containing stepped seating integrated into their depth. The audience observes the performance while being surrounded by deep, cold walls that absorb sound, heightening a sense of isolation and focus. Opposite the seating area, the performance space unfolds as an open and vertical volume. Its structural framework is reduced to columns and beams, emphasizing exposure and incompleteness. Around and between the structure, similarly articulated walls, some with openings, along with stairs and curtains, complete the scenography.

Carefully positioned lighting reinforces and enhances the adapted spatial

organization, guiding perception while maintaining uncertainty. The design does not merely host performance but becomes performative itself, continuously negotiating the boundary between reality and fiction, while embracing strangeness as a tool to deepen the theatrical experience. Both models engage with fictional existing structures that are heavy, solid, and oversized. The spaces are defined by fixed elements that appear almost untouchable, while the remaining areas are highly adaptable. Certain elements within these spaces make them visually and spatially compelling, such as reflective materials and heavy curtains. Together, the models convey the idea that performance can occur in any space, depending on how the space is shaped by it and the emotions it evokes. Theatre, therefore, is not limited by its immediate surroundings.



DESIGN APPROACH

Whoever comes, can stay

The Theater of the Future envisioned by the City of Delft differs significantly from the existing theater. Rather than functioning primarily as an evening venue, it aims to become part of everyday life by accommodating a broader range of activities that attract people throughout the day. In addition to this expanded program, the new theater will include a second performance space in the form of a black box theater for approximately 250 people, alongside a main auditorium with 800 seats.

At present, the theater operates as a receiving house, which is a common model in the Netherlands. The program changes nightly, with production companies arriving in the early afternoon. Trucks dock backstage to unload props and technical equipment required for each performance. Visiting companies often bring part of their own staff, meaning the theater is temporarily occupied and operated by different groups. However, the limited size of the current loading dock, stage, and backstage areas restricts the range of productions the city can host. Large-scale performances and trucks cannot be accommodated, and the stage is unable to support more complex productions. More generally, the spatial conditions of the existing theater are inadequate, including the facilities provided for artists and staff.

The proposed new site offers significantly more space, allowing for the inclusion of both performance venues as well as improved working conditions. As the Theater of Delft seeks to become more visible and integrated within the city, its program and opening hours must be reconsidered. Currently, the theater remains closed until shortly before performances begin. In contrast, the theatre of the future should be more than just a performance venue. It should serve as a place where audiences can engage in dialogue about culture and society, where theatre intersects with other art forms, and where people from all backgrounds feel welcome and can find meaning. It should enable performances to occur throughout the building, creating a dynamic environment that is at once festive and for the everyday, serious and playful.

The Theater of the Future should incorporate programs that attract people daily and encourage continuous interaction with the urban environment. Its new location along a pedestrian street with open facades creates an inviting and accessible setting that supports this ambition.

The new design proposal follows the model of contemporary cultural institutions that function as public “third spaces,” extending beyond their primary role as theaters. Precedents such as Theater Basel, Amare in The Hague, and the Barbican Centre in London serve as key inspirations. These institutions are open throughout the day and offer a variety of activities and spaces where visitors can spend time without the obligation to consume.

The Theater Basel provides an important example, as it was not originally designed as a third space. Built in 1970, it initially fulfilled a conventional theatrical function. Like many theaters, it faced challenges such as reduced funding and declining visitor numbers. In response, it introduced a more open and accessible public program. Located in the city center between the town hall and the train station, the theater is directly connected to the Tinguely Fountain, which transforms the outdoor forecourt into a public space for art. The fountain was built between 1975 and 1977 on the site of the former city theater stage and was designed by the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely. Its ten kinetic figures, arranged like performers on a stage, continuously enact an ever-changing spectacle, blurring the line between sculpture and performance. In this way, theatricality extends beyond the building itself into the urban space, inviting passersby to engage with art in their everyday environment. The theater now opens its doors daily, offering a foyer with a bar, reading areas, children’s spaces, and a large open zone that accommodates performances, discussions, and informal gatherings. This transformation has successfully increased both visitor numbers and revenue.

Amare in The Hague, by contrast, was designed from the outset as a multifunctional cultural hub and a contemporary “third space.” It houses multiple venues, including a dance theater, a concert hall, a performance space within a church located across the building, and a smaller multifunctional hall associated with a university. While it operates as a receiving house, it incorporates educational functions, with a music school occupying the upper floors for both children and higher education students, although these areas are not publicly accessible.

A defining feature of Amare is its foyer, which is conceived as an extension of the public realm. The foyer is long and positioned directly along a pedestrian zone, with a fully glazed facade that allows passersby to look inside, visually connecting the interior with the city. With entrances at both ends, it functions as a passage as well as a destination, reinforcing its role as an extension of the street. A large, multifunctional staircase serves not only as a circulation element but also as informal seating, enabling visitors to gather and observe performances taking place within the foyer itself. These performances can either be set against the backdrop of the city, or framed through the use of curtains. A ceiling-mounted

lighting rig further supports this adaptability, allowing the space to shift between everyday use and staged events.

Adjacent to the main foyer is the “market square,” a more intimate and flexible area that supports a variety of informal and community oriented activities. This space can host flea markets, study areas, relaxation zones, children’s play areas, open mic sessions, as well as yoga and dance classes. The Barbican Centre in London operates at a larger scale but follows a similar philosophy. It is a comprehensive cultural complex that includes theaters, cinemas, galleries,

restaurants, a library, and even residential units. Its mixed-use nature and multiple access points make it highly accessible, while still maintaining a degree of separation between public and private areas.

Together, these precedents demonstrate how theaters can evolve into open, inclusive cultural centers that engage with the city throughout the day.

They illustrate the potential for the Theater of the Future in Delft to move beyond its traditional role and become an active and accessible part of urban life. This ambition directly informs the approach to the new design proposal, where the theater must not only function as a performance venue but also as an integrated element within an existing and complex urban fabric.

Given the presence of residential units on the upper floors of the urban block, these homes must be carefully respected. The new theater should enhance, rather than diminish, the living conditions of the residents.

It should avoid obstructing views or reducing access to daylight, and instead contribute positively to the overall quality of the shared urban environment. This requires a sensitive architectural response that balances openness and activity with privacy and comfort.

In addition to the residential context, the existing HEMA building must be considered. Designed in the 1970s by the architects Lucas & Nijmeyer, the building has long been an integral part of Delft's city center. It has continuously housed a HEMA store, although its

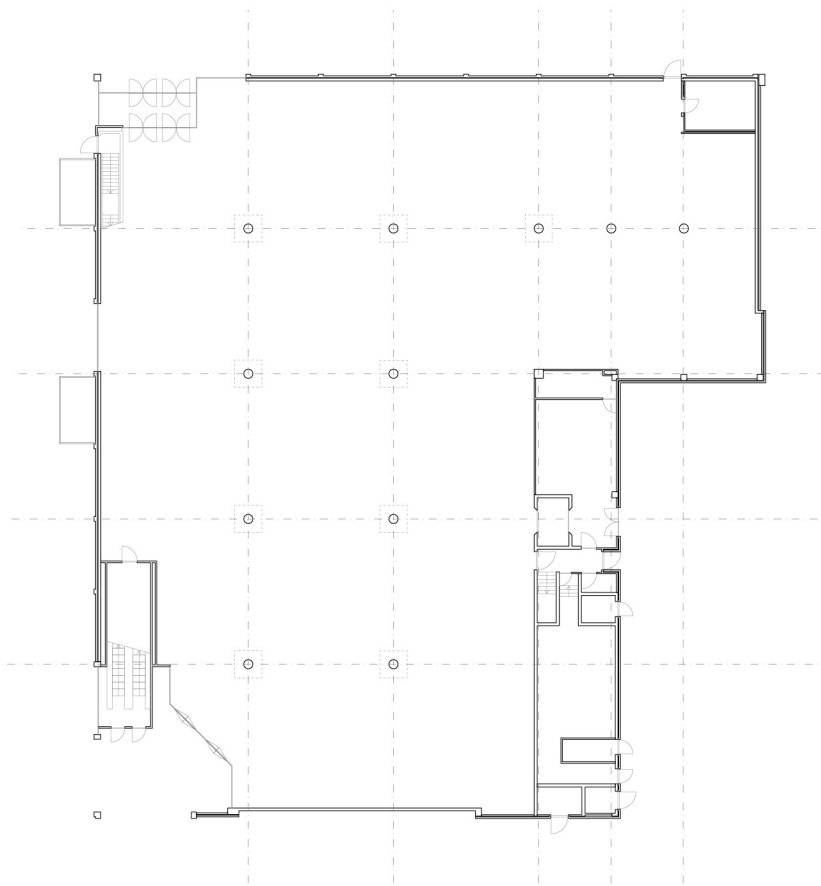
internal organization has changed over time. Originally, the entire building was occupied by the company, with retail on the ground floor, a restaurant on the first floor, and a bakery with storage above. Today, only the ground floor remains actively used as a retail space, with a small, enclosed restaurant located at the back. The upper floors are largely underutilized. The second floor is mostly vacant, aside from a small lunchroom and staff facilities, while the top floor is only partially used for storage.

HEMA, as a well-known Dutch retail brand approaching its 100th anniversary in 2026, remains culturally and commercially relevant despite the broader challenges faced by physical retail in the age of online shopping. In recent years, the company has successfully increased its sales and recovered from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, by adapting its sales strategy. With the introduction of the "HEMA 100" concept, the focus has shifted toward food related

products and the integration of cafés and restaurants, while maintaining its core principle of affordability. This evolution aligns with the idea of creating accessible, everyday spaces that attract a diverse public.

Given its historical significance and continued presence in Delft, the HEMA building should be incorporated into the project. Its existing structure and underused spaces present an opportunity to extend the program of the Theater of the Future. The project should contribute to a hybrid urban environment in which cultural, commercial, and

social functions overlap, an approach already envisioned in the historic urban development plans of the 1960s. In this way, the project can build on both the spatial strategies observed in the precedents and the specific qualities of the site, creating a theater that is



deeply embedded in the life of the city.

Building on this approach, the groundfloor becomes a central element in establishing this connection between theater and city. Open along the pedestrian zone, it creates an inviting and accessible space for the residents of Delft, functioning as the main foyer of the Theater of the Future. During the day, the foyer functions as a social environment where people can meet, have a coffee, read, work, study, bring their children, interact with others, or simply spend time. In addition, it should be flexible enough to host small-scale events such as flea markets, informal performances, workshops, discussions, readings, and talks.

In the evening, the space transforms into a more traditional theater foyer, capable of accommodating up to 800 visitors attending the performance in the main auditorium. A key aspect of the design is its relationship with the adjacent HEMA store. The transition between the foyer and the store should be seamless, creating a continuous and coherent spatial experience. As HEMA already attracts a wide and diverse audience, the theater can benefit from this proximity by engaging visitors who might not otherwise enter a cultural institution.

The threshold between the theater and the HEMA could be defined by a newly designed café or restaurant, serving both as a shared social space and as a point of connection between the two programs. Ideally, the theater and the HEMA could share a common entrance at ground level, further reinforcing their integration.

To truly realize the building's mixed-use character, it must accommodate more than just a foyer as a third space, alongside a theater, a shopping facility, and residential units. The first floor of the HEMA building, which is currently unoccupied, offers strong spatial qualities and should be integrated into the project.

At present, Delft lacks dedicated spaces for temporary exhibitions and emerging artistic practices. While the city hosts several museums with permanent collections, there are limited opportunities for local artists or short-term exhibitions in a central, accessible location. As a result, many cultural activities are dispersed across surrounding cities. Within Delft, the Orange Hall at the Faculty of Architecture at TU Delft frequently hosts exhibitions

such as Archiprix, business fairs, and student showcases. The new space as part of the theater of the future could also be considered an extension of the Strandbeesten Mortuarium by Theo Jansen, a renowned Delft based artist known for his kinetic sculptures made from yellow plastic tubes. However, his current exhibition space is located in the southern part of Delft. Both of these venues remain poorly integrated into the urban fabric. The Theater of the Future has the potential to bring this type of cultural programming into the city center, making it more visible and accessible to a wider audience. When not used for exhibitions, the space could support a range of alternative functions, such as study areas during exam periods, a pop-up cinema, or larger workshops requiring flexible spatial conditions. The addition of a black box theater further strengthens this vision by providing an experimental and adaptable environment for diverse forms of art and performance. Such a space encourages unconventional uses and aligns with contemporary cultural practices.

In this way, the theater becomes a continuously active and flexible environment that supports both cultural production and everyday urban life. The Theater of the Future is no longer conceived solely as a space for theatrical performances. Instead, it becomes a platform that accommodates performance, interaction, communication, and community.

Design Concept



The proposal replaces four buildings located at the center of the site that currently do not contain residential units and are primarily used for storage and retail. This is where the new theater is positioned. The building is oriented along the east west axis, stretching from Kruisstraat to Paradijspoort. A key factor in determining the theaters placement is truck access. The building requires daily deliveries, and loading and unloading must operate efficiently. Due to city regulations, trucks can only access the site from Kruisstraat on the eastern side. This condition defines the location of the theaters back of house areas.

The loading dock is positioned directly at the edge of the plot, ensuring that trucks do not block the street while also allowing for smooth integration with the theaters internal logistics. Immediately adjacent to the loading dock is the backstage area, with the stage and auditorium connected directly to it.

As a result, the western side of the site naturally becomes the front of house zone. The theater acts as the heart of the project, with surrounding functions organized around it.

This approach is also reflected in the material strategy. The auditorium, stage, and fly tower are constructed using opace zinc panelling, anchoring the building within the urban context. In contrast, the surrounding program is designed with lighter structures that appear to float alongside it.

To create more space in the front of house area, the underside of the auditorium is lifted, extending the foyer and generating a distinctive spatial quality beneath it. The auditorium and fly tower require significant height to function properly, exceeding the height of the surrounding buildings. The design therefore aims to lower the outer edges of these volumes toward the street as much as possible, while allowing the inner edges to rise. This results in a large, stepped shed roof, makinf the auditorium become its own object. The overall shape of the obejct is a diamnd shape resulting from the interior seating arrangement, giving the new theater a dynamic silhouette. To have one unified architectural language the outhter walls of the auditorium are slightly sloped. The new building clearly distinguishes itself from the existing structures.

The ground floor of the new theater plays a crucial role in its integration

into the urban fabric. As previously explained the site is located in a vibrant area of the city. The same criteria for the ideas of a third space by Ray Oldenburg perfectly. The underside of the auditorium, along with two adjacent double height spaces, forms part of the foyer. This space extends from the existing HEMA building to the southern edge of the site, where it sits subtly beneath the residential units.

As a result, the foyer varies in height from 12.5 meters to 3 meters, creating a range of distinct spatial qualities.

During the summer months, the foyer should be able to open its facade, dissolving the boundary between interior and exterior and allowing the space to merge with the adjacent pedestrian zone. In this condition, the foyer can function almost as an extension of the public square. Through its highly public and flexible nature, the foyer increases the visibility of the theater within the city and attracts a broader audience, including those who do not typically engage with the Theater of Delft.

In contrast, the existing HEMA building, which will be integrated into the project, features a closed and solid facade. It is clad in bright red brick with vertical articulation. The interior is more raw, characterized by 60 cm diameter round concrete columns and a ceiling height of 4.2 meters. This space allows for a highly flexible program, such as temporary exhibitions or events. Its rough interior quality also suits the character of a black box theater, which will be partially accommodated within the existing structure. The interior will be preserved in its original state, creating an atmosphere that feels raw and slightly industrial providing a contrast to the new building.

At night, when the theater comes alive, the facade will glow like a lantern in the heart of the city.

The black box, located on the third floor of the existing HEMA structure, rises 9 m above the roofline and features the same translucent facade, adding to the city's nighttime vibrancy.

Groundfloor



The ground floor of the project is divided into four main zones: the HEMA store, the back-of-house facilities, the auditorium, and the foyer. Together, these functions are distributed across the entire urban block.

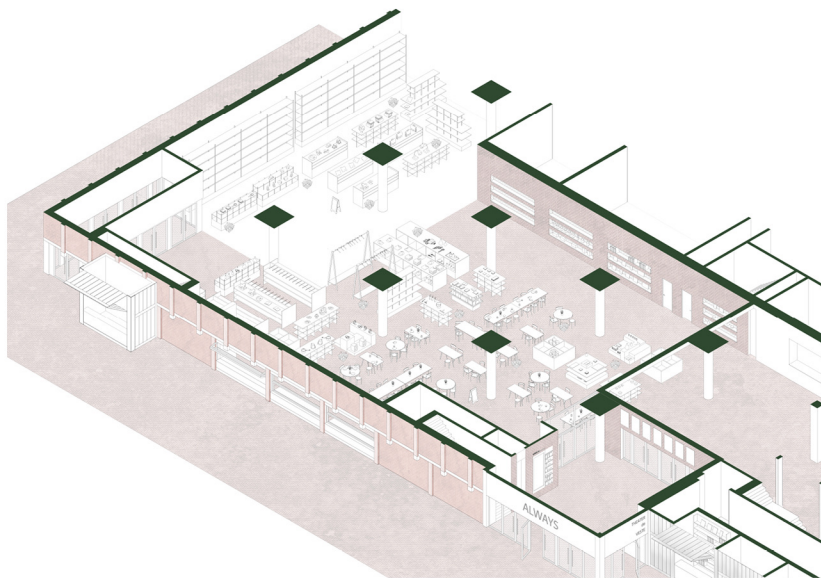
On the northern side of the site, the HEMA store is located, along with its offices and storage facilities. The eastern side accommodates the back-of-house functions, strategically positioned adjacent to the truck access route. Next to the back-of-house area are the new office spaces for the theatre and a green room for performers. Both are situated at street level, creating a visible connection between the city, the artists, and the theatre's operational spaces. The western side of the project is occupied by the public foyer, directly connected to the pedestrian zone.

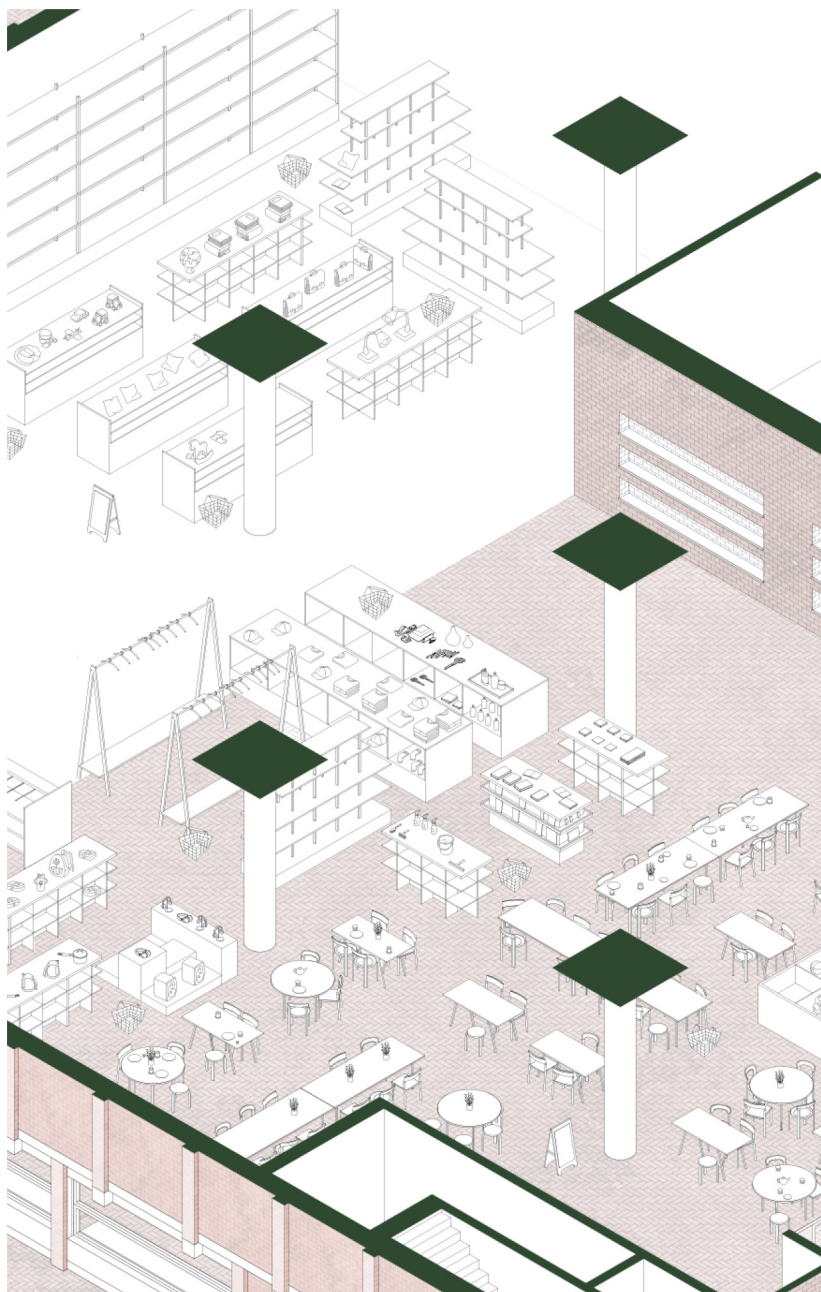
The main entrance to the theatre is integrated into the existing HEMA structure, expanding the current entrance and creating a shared point of access for both the theatre and the HEMA store. Upon entering, visitors can choose to take the stairs or lift to the first floor or remain on the ground floor. They are welcomed by a small box office and a programme wall displaying upcoming theatre events.

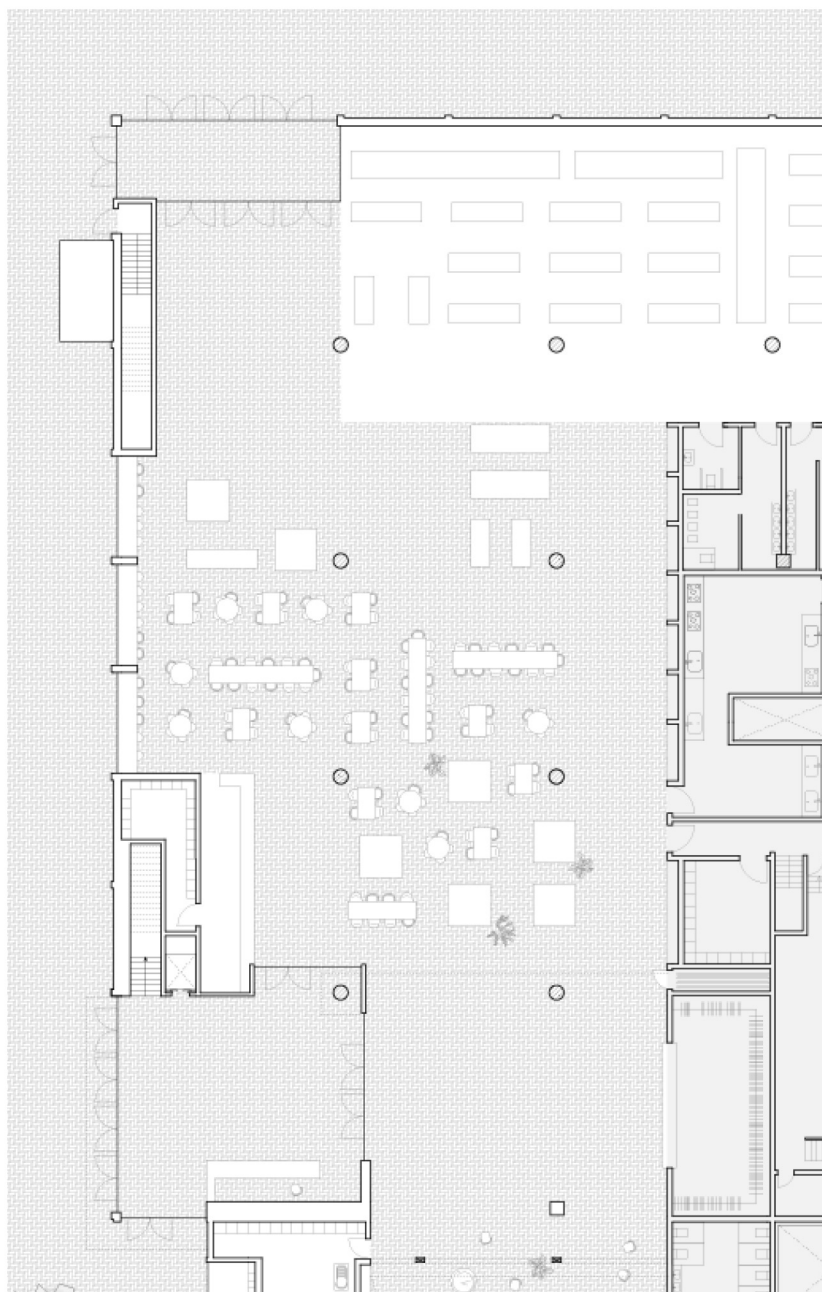
From the entrance, visitors can either enter the café, which creates a threshold between the two structures, or continue towards the theatre side, where the cloakroom is located. Both routes lead into the same central space, as the HEMA store and theatre are seamlessly integrated. During the evening, the HEMA section can be closed off, allowing the entrance to function exclusively as the theatre's main entrance. By sharing the entrance during daytime hours, the theatre becomes more accessible and visible to the public.

To the north of the entrance, the HEMA café and restaurant are positioned, reinforcing the idea of providing affordable food and hospitality for everyone. The café combines elements of a theatre shop with HEMA products, creating an intentionally ambiguous atmosphere in which visitors are not immediately aware of which part of the building they occupy. The café opens onto the pedestrian street, strengthening its relationship with the public realm.

Three large new windows are introduced into the HEMA façade. These windows incorporate seating areas where visitors can sit and look out onto the







street, while passers-by can observe activity inside. This visual exchange activates the façade and sparks curiosity among pedestrians. Beyond the café, the main retail area of the HEMA store gradually unfolds. The store itself remains largely unchanged in terms of programme and concept. As a popular and essential retail destination in Delft, preserving the HEMA's identity and function is considered important for the city. Attached to the store are the servant spaces required. The existing courtyard, currently used for deliveries and parking, will be covered and transformed into new ground-floor storage space. This significantly improves the current situation, in which storage is located on the second floor, making the transport of goods throughout the building inefficient and time consuming.

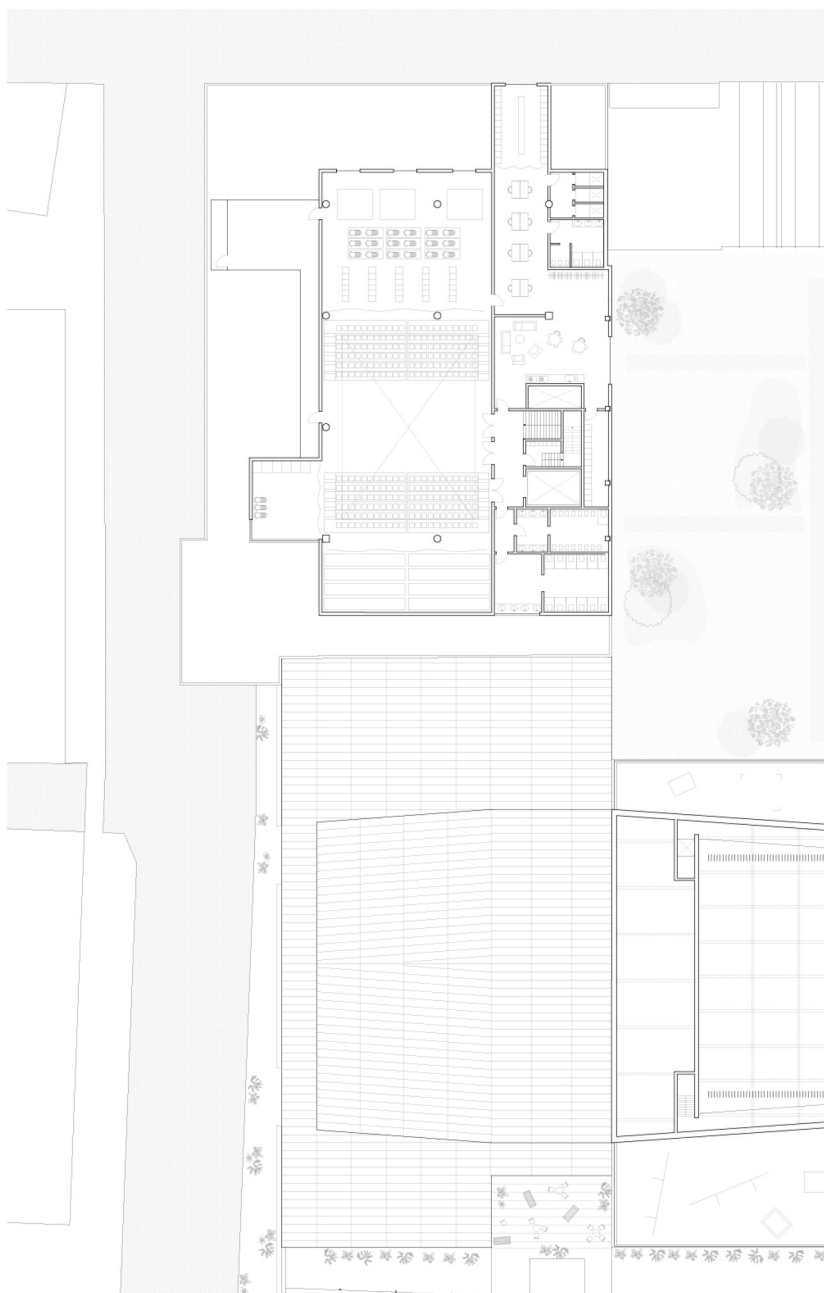
Adjacent to the storage area are the offices and staff lunchroom. Both spaces are oriented towards the street, representing a significant improvement over the existing situation, where these functions were hidden deep within the building and lacked access to daylight and views.

On the eastern side of the building, the truck access and loading facilities are located. A compact loading bay, capable of accommodating up to three trucks, is positioned directly adjacent to the street. This delivery zone is shared by both the theatre and HEMA, serving deliveries, waste collection, and mail distribution.

The delivery schedules of the two Hema and the Theater differ significantly, allowing the shared facility to function efficiently. HEMA receives deliveries three times per week, typically around 7:00 a.m., whereas theatre companies generally require access from midday onwards. In theory, this means that delivery vehicles rarely overlap, although the loading bay is large enough to accommodate both functions simultaneously if necessary.

The loading dock is fully covered, providing a comfortable and weather-protected environment for loading and unloading goods. It is enclosed by a folding metal door that aligns with the architectural language of the new façade.

Positioned between the loading dock and the theatre's new office spaces is the artists' entrance. Both the offices and the entrance have a direct relationship with the street, greatly improving the working environment for





theatre staff. Compared to the existing situation, employees benefit from more generous spaces and a stronger connection to both the city and the theatre itself.

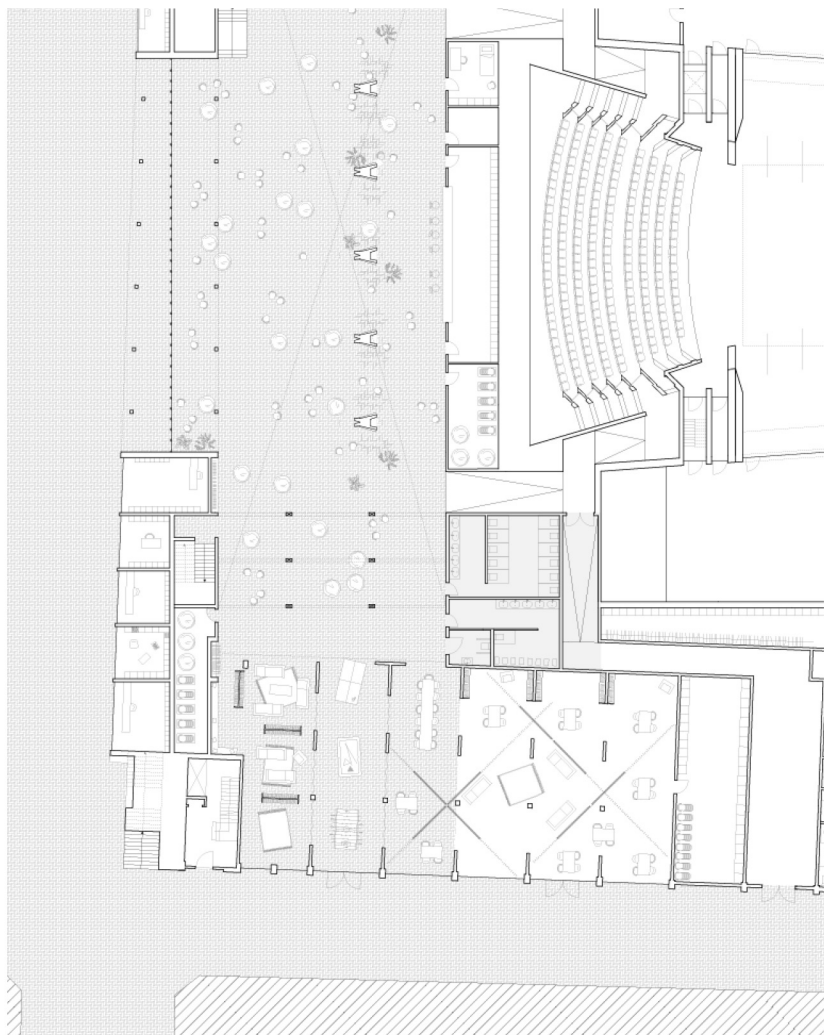
The artists' entrance remains intentionally discreet, reflecting the preferences of many performers. Upon entering, artists arrive at a small reception area before continuing into a welcoming green room. The green room overlooks the canal-lined street and surrounding trees, providing a pleasant and calm environment before performances. From here, artists have direct access to the dressing rooms located on the floor above.

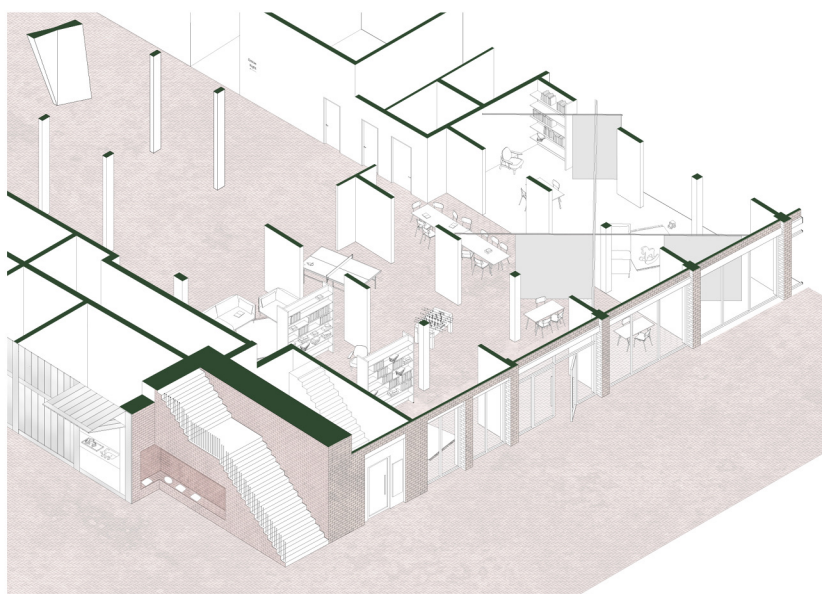
An accessible dressing room is located on the ground floor. A gently sloping ramp connects this space directly to stage level, ensuring full wheelchair accessibility and creating an inclusive environment for performers of all abilities.

The western side of the ground floor, adjacent to the pedestrian street, is dedicated to the public foyer. The ambition for this space is to create a highly public interior at the heart of Delft. Its location aligns closely with the characteristics of the „third place“ as described by sociologist Ray Oldenburg. According to Oldenburg, third places are often situated along everyday routes, at important intersections, or within mixed-use urban environments where diverse social groups naturally come together. Their success depends on accessibility, visibility, and permeability, allowing people to enter freely and appropriate the space according to their own needs. In this way, they function as connective tissue within the city, linking private and public life while strengthening local identity and social cohesion.

The foyer extends from the southern edge of the site to the existing HEMA structure. Multiple entrances provide access from different directions, allowing visitors to experience the space from various perspectives and reinforcing its public character.

The southern section of the foyer reuses parts of the existing building structure. As a result, the ceiling height is limited to approximately three metres, creating a more intimate atmosphere within the larger public building. This spatial condition informs the programme accommodated within this area. The space is designed to host a variety of community-oriented activities, including language courses, book clubs, knitting workshops, arts





and crafts sessions, and other informal gatherings. In addition, it provides co-working spaces, reading niches, board games, lounge areas, and a dedicated children's zone. Sliding partitions allow the space to be subdivided into smaller rooms, creating flexible settings that can offer both privacy and acoustic separation when required.

Moving northwards through the foyer, the compressed and intimate atmosphere gradually opens into a generous double height space. This new volume forms part of the new proposal and is characterised by its openness, daylight, and spatial generosity. It functions as the central circulation and gathering space of the foyer, connecting the various programme areas, providing access to the auditorium, and linking visitors to the balcony level on the first floor.

From here, visitors continue beneath the auditorium itself. This unique and expressive space is defined by the structure that supports the theatre above. A crossed-beam ceiling spans overhead, shaping the character of the entire volume and making the building's construction visible to its users. The result is a spatial experience that is both distinctive and memorable. Designed as a flexible public interior, this area can accommodate a wide variety of events and activities. The space is generous in scale and deliberately retains a robust, unfinished character. Five monumental columns, sculpturally shaped and carefully integrated into the architecture, support the auditorium above. These columns extend deep into the ground to transfer the substantial structural loads of the theatre.

Beyond their structural role, the columns also serve as pieces of furniture. On the side facing away from the street and towards the bar, each column opens into a small niche where visitors can sit, rest, or work. These niches incorporate small shelves that provide space for personal belongings and charging points for electronic devices. The columns also feature integrated hooks on the outside that increase the flexibility of the space, allowing them to function as informal coat racks or support temporary installations and events.

To ensure optimal acoustic performance within the auditorium, each column is separated from the surrounding floor finish by a rubber isolation joint. This prevents vibrations from travelling through the foyer floor into



the structural elements supporting the theatre above.

Apart from these structural elements, the space beneath the auditorium remains largely unobstructed. On a daily basis, the theatre provides movable furniture such as chairs, coffee tables, and beanbags, allowing visitors to appropriate and organise the space according to their own needs. Storage for this furniture is located nearby, enabling the layout to be easily adapted throughout the day.

This flexibility allows the space to serve many different purposes. During daytime hours, it functions as an open public interior for work, relaxation, meetings, and community activities. In the evening, it transforms into a traditional theatre foyer capable of accommodating up to 800 visitors attending performances. In addition, the space can host a variety of events such as readings, performances, yoga classes, dance workshops, flea markets, and many other public activities.

At the back of the space, where the floor level reaches its lowest point, a bar is located. While it supports theatre related events and gatherings, it is not intended to operate continuously. The public foyer is conceived as a genuinely inclusive space that does not require visitors to make a purchase in order to occupy it, ensuring that the foyer remains accessible to all.

Between the space beneath the auditorium and the street, a long glass facade defines the edge of the building. Two rows of columns articulate this facade and support the first-floor balcony above.

The facade consists of tall industrial folding windows in a reddish tone. These windows can be fully opened, dissolving the boundary between inside and outside. This effect is further strengthened by extending the pedestrian pavement into the building. The same reddish brick herringbone pavement continues indoors, reinforcing the continuity between public space and interior.

On the opposite side of the auditorium, another double-height space opens up, similar to the southern one, creating a second transition zone. From here, a secondary entrance to the main hall provides access to the other side of the auditorium. This threshold space connects the existing HEMA structure with the theatre.

Service spaces are located on both sides of this double-height volume.

An open and inviting staircase leads visitors up to a mezzanine, forming a link between the old and the new parts of the building. From the mezzanine, visitors can once again access the first-floor balcony, continuing the spatial sequence throughout the project.

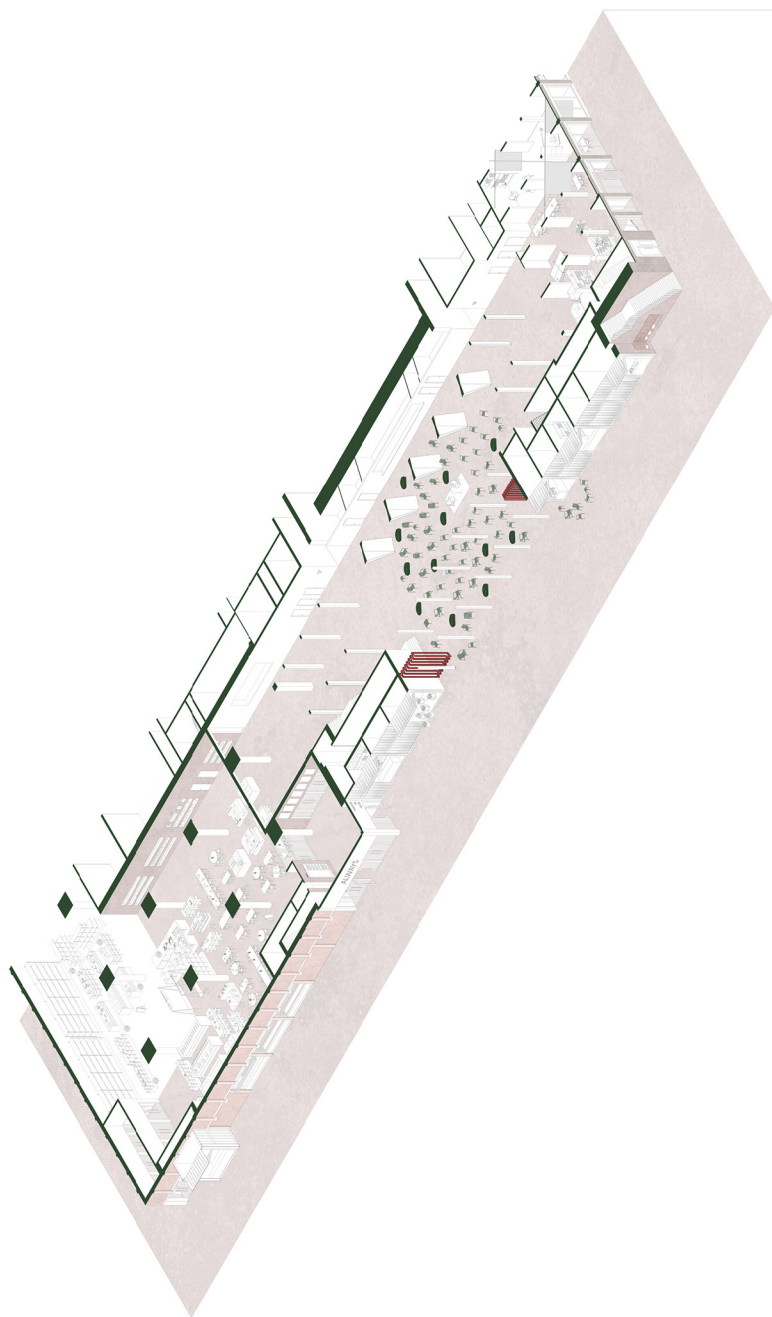
The two double height spaces located on either side of the auditorium, do not provide a direct visual connection to the street. In fact, the street is not visible from these areas, as the façade is fully enclosed.

Instead, the interior is animated by interactive walls that communicate with the foyer. These walls incorporate bookshelves, ticket vending machines, clothing exchange racks, and integrated furniture such as benches. As natural light is limited in this zone, daylight is introduced from the first floor, where it filters down into the foyer below.

Towards the street, the facade opens up completely. The groundfloor is activated by small stands and kiosks. These elements follow the same industrial design language as the windows and are designed to fold vertically, clad in metal when closed.

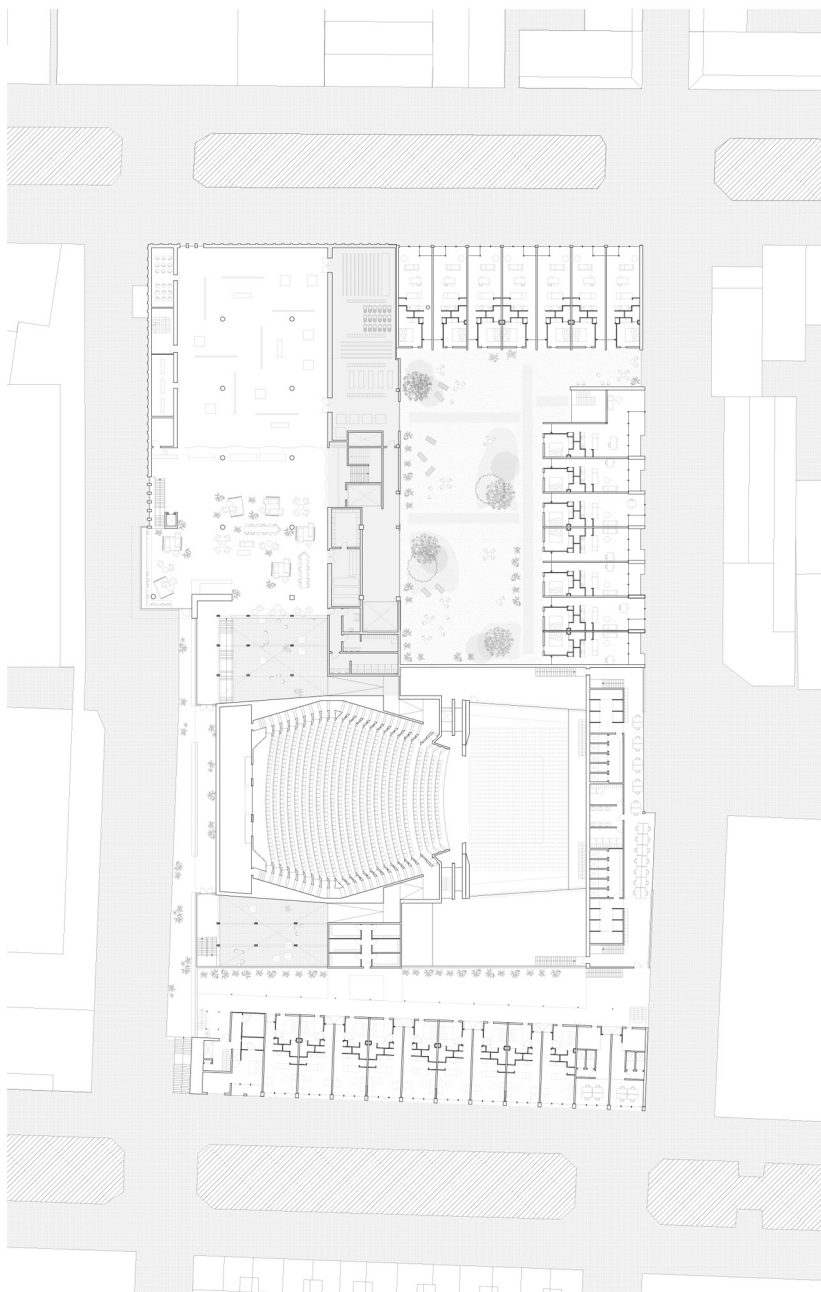
In the existing street condition, informal food stands are already present and are highly valued and frequently used by the citizens of Delft. The design builds upon this existing urban activity, actively engaging with the street, encouraging people to pause, and breaking up the length of the facade through small scale interventions and points of activity. Overall, the project transforms the ground floor into a highly permeable public interior that merges theatre, HEMA, and public life into a continuous urban landscape. By interweaving commercial, cultural, and community functions, the design creates a sequence spatial conditions, from intimate rooms to large double height spaces that support both everyday use and large-scale public events.

The architecture deliberately blurs the boundary between inside and outside, extending the street into the building through material continuity, activated façades, and openable structures. At the same time, deeper interior zones introduce a more sheltered and atmospheric world shaped by structure, light, and programmatic flexibility.





First Floor



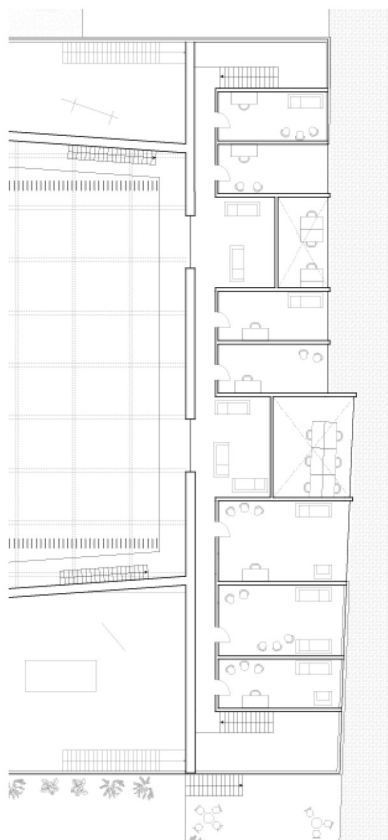
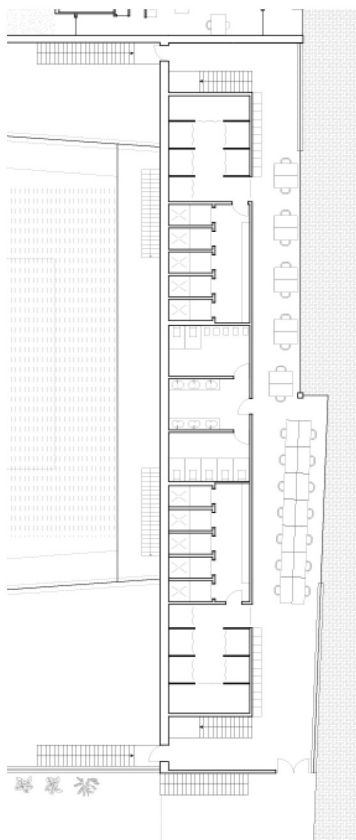
The first floor includes the back of house areas as well as the first floor of the existing HEMA structure.

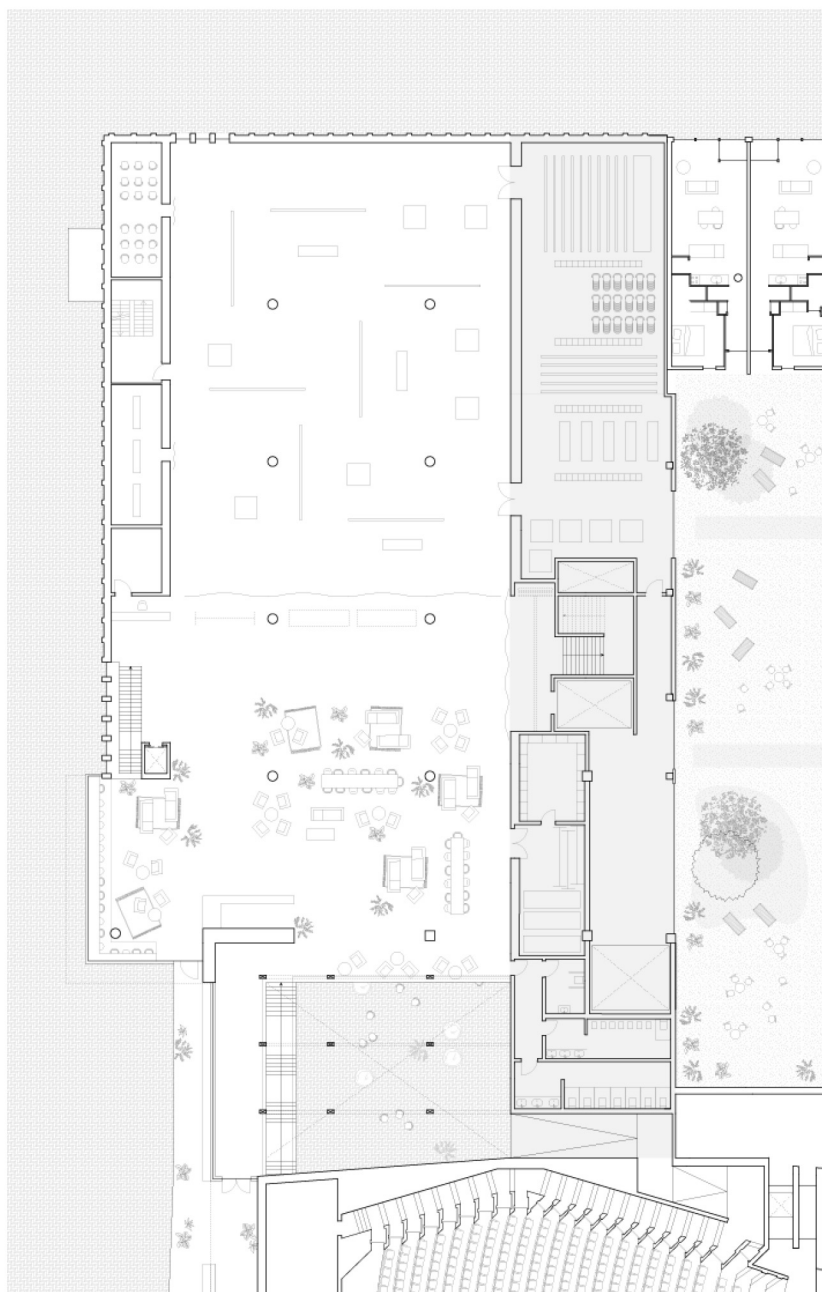
Within the new structure, the dressing rooms are located on the first floor above the unloading dock for trucks. These dressing rooms are accessible from the artists' reception via an existing staircase in the southern building of the urban block. There are two types of dressing rooms. The first type is located within an apartment that currently serves as storage for the existing shop on the ground floor. This apartment can accommodate a small company of up to six people. The second type is designed for larger companies of up to twenty five people.

The smaller dressing room provides a more intimate and comfortable environment, allowing artists to feel at home rather than overwhelmed by a large, underutilized space. The larger company dressing room is arranged over two levels. The first floor contains all necessary facilities, including showers, changing rooms, bathrooms, and preparation areas equipped with makeup stations. A long glass facade allows natural daylight to enter the space and offers artists views over the city. The second floor contains a series of artists' quiet rooms. Two voids in the floor visually connect the upper and lower levels, creating a sense of openness. These quiet rooms feature large floor to ceiling windows and a warm, calming palette of colours and materials. The spaces provide artists with an opportunity to rest and prepare before their performance, offering a private environment where they can relax, focus, and calm their nerves. Along the corridor leading to the individual rooms, windows provide views onto the stage. From the first floor of the dressing room area, artists have direct access to the side stages.

The first floor of the existing HEMA structure is currently unused. As part of the theatre expansion, this space is repurposed to accommodate an extension of the public programme. Characterised by its existing mushroom columns, the floor offers a distinctive and robust spatial quality. The space can be accessed from the balcony, the groundfloor foyer, and the staircase located at the main entrance.

Upon entering from the main entrance, visitors are welcomed by a small reception desk where tickets can be checked for performances in the upstairs black box theatre or for private events held within the exhibition





space. However, the primary function of the floor is as a public exhibition space, inspired by the concept of a “People’s Palace.” Rather than hosting long-term museum exhibitions, the space is intended for short-term and temporary exhibitions, similar to those regularly organised in the Orange Hall of the Faculty of Architecture at TU Delft.

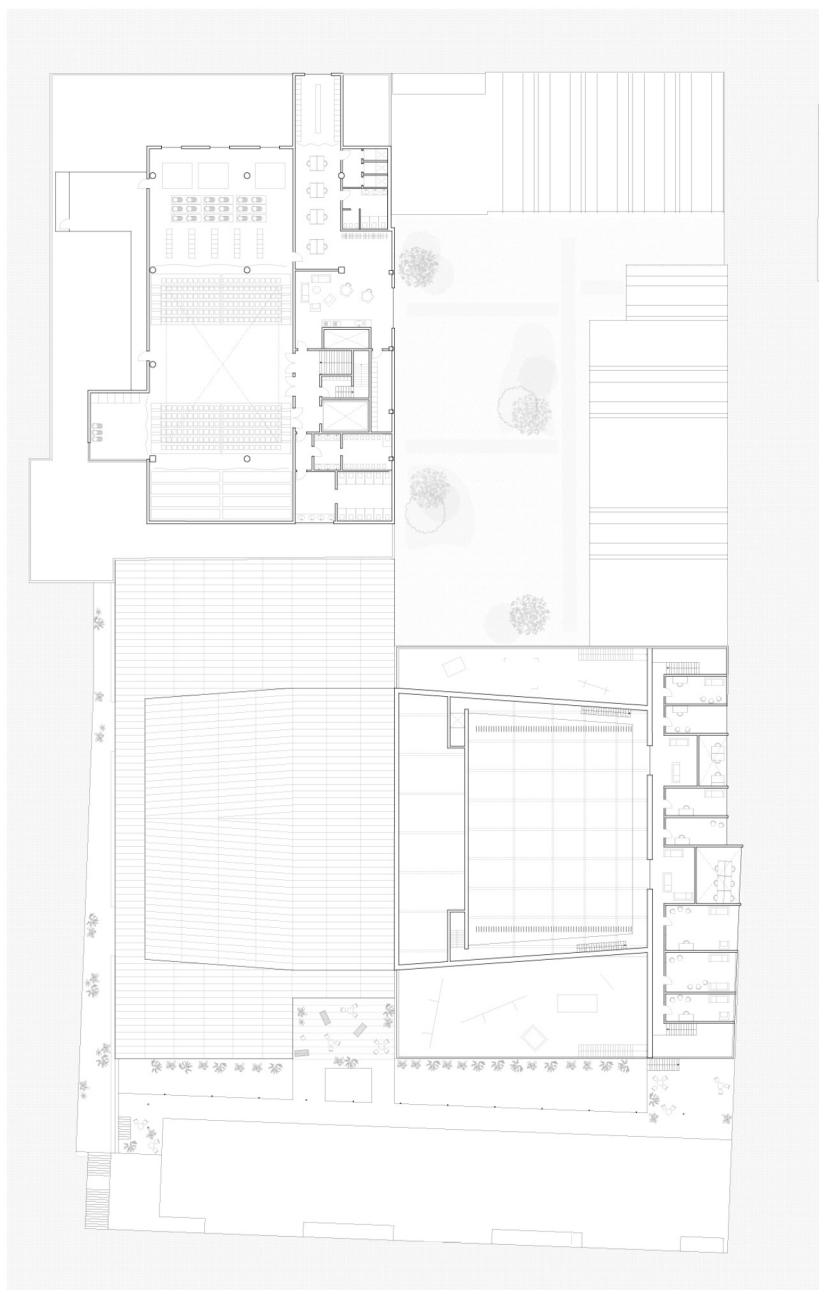
Currently, Delft lacks a dedicated public exhibition space within the city centre. This floor offers a large, open plan with minimal direct sunlight, creating ideal conditions for a wide variety of exhibitions. Only three small openings are introduced into the façade, providing new, strategically framed views towards the church towers of Delft. Storage facilities are located on one side of the space, enabling the theatre to support exhibitions with equipment and display materials. On the opposite side, two small dark rooms are provided for screenings and multimedia installations, broadening the range of possible uses and clients.

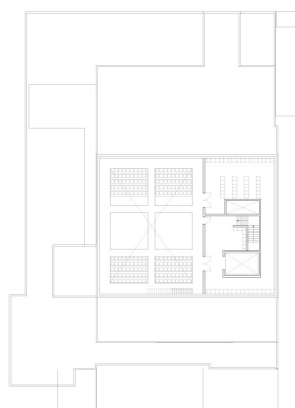
External organisations and cultural partners can collaborate with the theatre to exhibit their work, generating additional revenue while strengthening the theatre’s relationship with the city and its surrounding communities. These exhibitions do not need to be theatre-related; instead, they can encompass a broad range of subjects and disciplines. This flexibility allows the theatre building to engage with contemporary social, cultural, and political topics, helping it remain relevant and connected to public life. Simultaneously, the space functions as the foyer for the Black Box theatre. The Black Box is located above the exhibition space and can be accessed from the first floor via an inviting staircase or elevator situated alongside the other service spaces on this level.

These service spaces provide additional storage for flexible bars and coat racks. The first floor also features an existing bay window overlooking the street. A long communal table is integrated into this area, allowing visitors to sit, work, or enjoy views of the city. The windows facing the table are designed to fold open completely, mirroring the operable windows on the ground floor. This feature enhances the relationship between the interior and the street, creating an indoor-outdoor experience during the summer months and allowing the space to benefit from natural ventilation and views of the city.

On a day to day basis, this space can be opened up and serve as an informal working area or gathering place for visitors. Especially during the week-ends the theater will probably need to open the first floor to accomodate all the people visting the building. To ensure flexibility, approximately half of the firstfloor area can be separated with a curtain, allowing the exhibition space to operate independently when necessary.

Second floor





The second floor houses the Black Box theatre. It reuses the existing third floor, but a partial structural intervention of four 9.6 x 9.6 metre grid is carved out of the ceiling, creating the necessary height for a Black Box theatre. The total internal height reaches 9 metres.

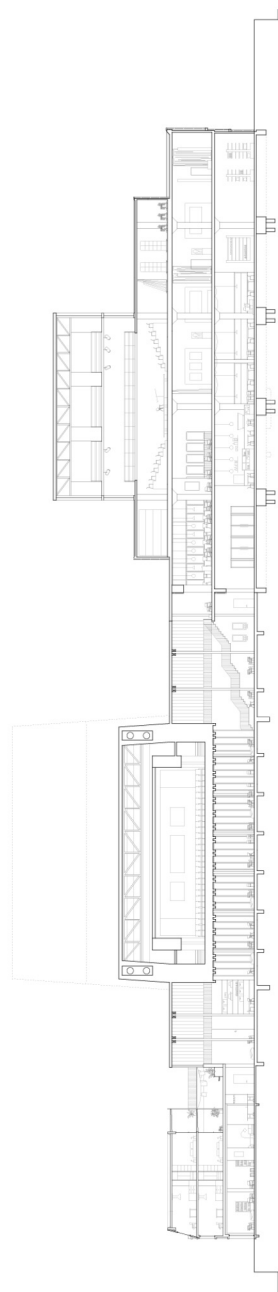
When visitors ascend the staircase from the first floor, they arrive directly in the Black Box theatre. Along the eastern servant space strip of the floor, the artist facilities and additional public bathrooms are located, while the remaining space is dedicated to the performance area and storage. The artist area includes a small green room equipped with a kitchenette and windows overlooking the courtyard of the neighbours. The dressing room accommodates approximately seven people. On this floor, there is no strict separation between artists and visitors, making it possible that they may encounter each other before or after a performance.

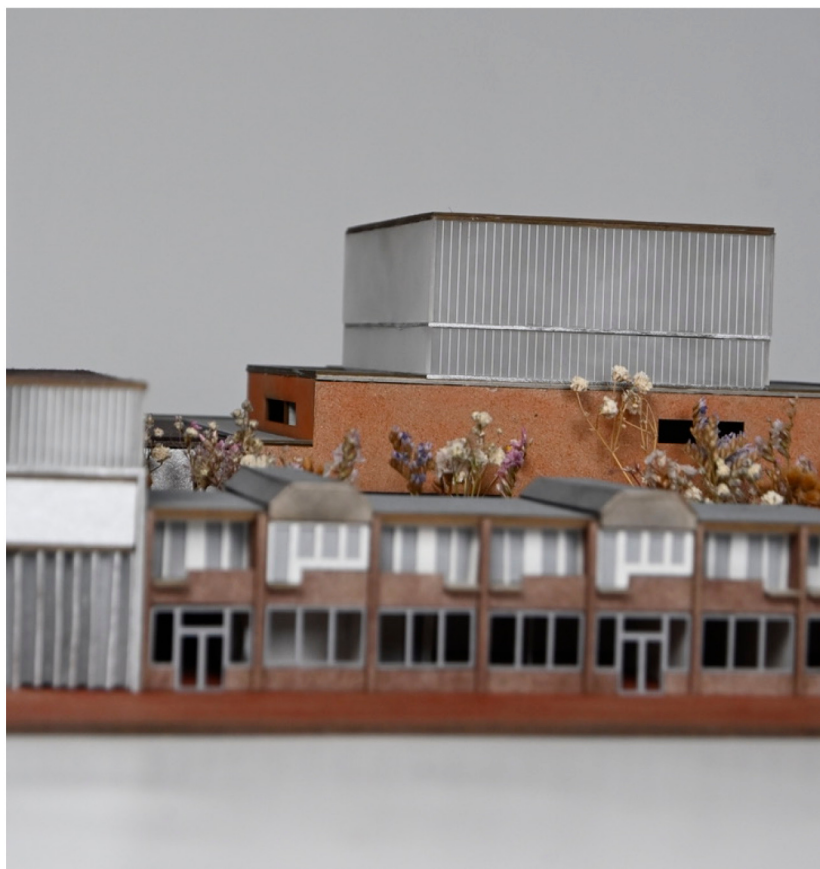
Props are delivered via an elevator from the ground floor, where the trucks are parked. They are then transported along a corridor to a service lift that brings them up to the first floor. From there, they are transferred to the main public elevator, which continues up to the Black Box theatre.

Since the Black Box has a capacity of only 250 people, the quantity and size of props are limited. Essentially, the second floor functions as an open plan theatre space, similar to the first floor, allowing directors and artists to configure it as needed. Performances can take place across the entire floor when no additional height is required, or within a clearly defined stage area with a 9-metre ceiling height, including a lighting grid and other technical infrastructure.

The spatial flexibility offers strong potential for contemporary performance practices. Three large new windows are introduced into the façade, bringing daylight into the space. In addition, the existing upper level of the HEMA building has an irregular layout with hidden corners, which creates opportunities for experimental and playful performances.

The designated performance zone, including all technical requirements, is separated only by a curtain, allowing for quick and flexible spatial changes. The surrounding areas also function as storage for the Black Box theatre, accommodating tribunes, stage equipment, and chairs. Since the Black Box Theatre extends beyond the current height of the HEMA building, it will be





clad in the same glass channel facade as the adjacent new structure. This creates a visual connection between the two buildings, allowing them to communicate architecturally and making it clear that they belong together as part of a unified design.

Auditorium

The auditorium forms the largest part of the building. It projects from the main volume, taking on a distinct form and reading as an independent object. Its overall geometry is diamond shaped, a result of the internal seating arrangement.

As mentioned earlier, the underside of the auditorium lifts to create additional space at groundfloor level. To extend this sloping logic and make the volume more kind for neighbours and the city, its outer edges are lowered as much as possible. Since the fly tower requires significantly greater height, the resulting roofscape becomes a large stepped shed roof.

Additionally, all edges are pulled inward so that each facade is slightly inclined, giving the building a more unified and cohesive appearance.

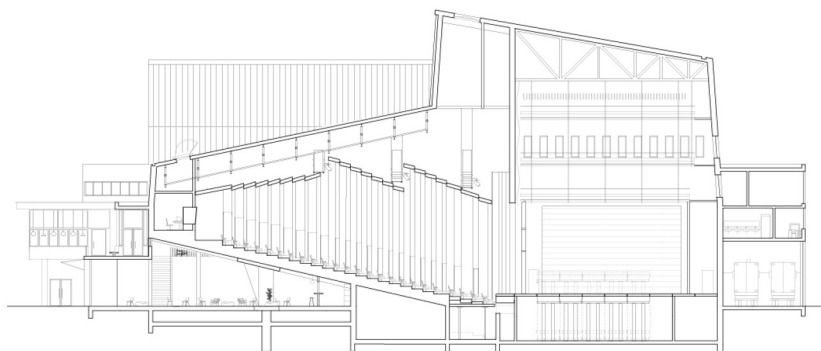
The city of Delft currently has one main theatre, Theater de Veste. It contains a single auditorium with a capacity of 500 seats, arranged across two balconies, and a stage measuring 10 × 15 metres with a fixed proscenium opening of 12 metres. At present, there is almost no side stage space. Theater de Veste aims to expand and improve its facilities. The brief calls for a new auditorium with 800 seats and a stage appropriately scaled to support this increase.

The proposal offers a significant improvement, featuring a stage measuring 20 × 18 metres, along with two side stages of 11 × 20 metres and 6 × 22 metres. The proscenium will no longer be fixed, allowing flexibility with a minimum opening of 12 metres and a maximum of 15 metres.

Given the increased stage size, the proposed Theatre of the Future is comparable to theatres in cities such as Almere, Utrecht, Apeldoorn, Maastricht, The Hague, and Tilburg. A closer examination of their programming reveals that concerts are the most frequent events, followed by traditional theatre and comedy performances.

The new stage will also be capable of accommodating performances by Nederlands Dans Theater, one of the world's leading contemporary dance companies. Based in The Hague, the company regularly performs to sold out audiences and could attract a significant number of visitors to Delft. In addition, the Theatre of the Future will include an orchestra pit, typically used for opera and dance productions, which further enhances its suitability for hosting companies such as Nederlands Dans Theater.







This addition strengthens Delfts potential to become an appealing venue for high profile performances.

The auditorium is designed as a single tier space with 23 rows, each one metre deep. The number of seats per row ranges from 12 to 35, forming an overall oval shape. Each row is elevated by a 23 cm step and arranged along a curve to ensure optimal sightlines from every seat. Dutch fire regulations for theatres allow up to 50 seats per row, provided there is at least 47 cm of clearance between the back of one seat and the folded seat behind. The seats themselves are 55 to 59 cm wide, ensuring comfort during performances.

The interior atmosphere of the auditorium should foster a strong sense of community. By arranging all seating in a single tier, the space creates the impression that everyone is sitting beneath one unified cupola. In contrast to the rough, industrial character of the new proposal and the existing HEMA structure, the interior of the auditorium should feel more refined and delicate. In this sense, the auditorium distinguishes itself from the rest of the building externally, while its interior continues this logic, becoming an independent object both architecturally and programmatically.

To create a warm and intimate atmosphere, the space will be clad in slightly glossy, dark stained timber, while the technical ceiling is fully concealed with the same material. Each step will have a wooden finish to emphasize the feeling of unity. The seats will be upholstered in a calm, dark green fabric, enhancing the overall sense of comfort and cohesion.

The entrance to the auditorium is located in the foyer, integrated within the long strip of servant spaces. Access to the auditorium is provided on both sides, dividing visitors into left and right sections. To enhance the sense of everyone sharing the same space, access to the auditorium is intentionally designed to be narrow and intimate. All spectators ascend together via a main ramp to reach the stage level, where the wheelchair accessible seating is located. From there, the audience arrives at a staircase approximately 1.5 metres wide, which follows the oval shape of the auditorium and subtly reveals what lies beyond.

The staircase is deliberately stark, with white painted walls and ceiling, creating a neutral transition space. From this point, each row is directly

accessible. The staircase and the auditorium interior are separated by deep, narrow walls. Each pair of walls forms a corridor, clad in wood that hints at the warm materiality of the auditorium beyond. Doors are seamlessly integrated into the walls, which also indicate the seating rows located beyond them.

Upon reaching their row, spectators pass through two walls, each approximately 90 cm deep, and emerge into a large, open space. This space feels warm, calm, and unified, defined by a single material and animated by the presence of the audience. Along each wall inside the auditorium, a small light fixture is positioned at a height of approximately three metres, introducing a human scale element within the expansive interior. Additional lighting required to illuminate the space is seamlessly integrated into the ceiling.

The concealed technical ceiling follows the same lines as the giant she-proof covering the auditorium, connecting the interior and exterior of the building. The stepped ceiling continues into the walls, creating strong linear relationships within the interior, echoing the exterior facade of vertical zinc panels and extending the logic of the proscenium. Once everyone is seated and the performance is about to begin, the doors embedded within the walls close simultaneously, marking a clear and collective transition into the performance.

Across the entire volume of the auditorium, only a limited number of precisely placed windows are introduced. In traditional theatre buildings, the stage areas are typically enclosed and largely without openings, as performers and technicians often spend long working hours on stage preparing productions, which are primarily lit by artificial lighting.

In this project, windows are introduced within the main gallery of the fly-tower. These openings are carefully aligned with the exterior zinc panels of the façade, integrating them seamlessly into the overall composition while simultaneously breaking up the perception of the heavy volume.

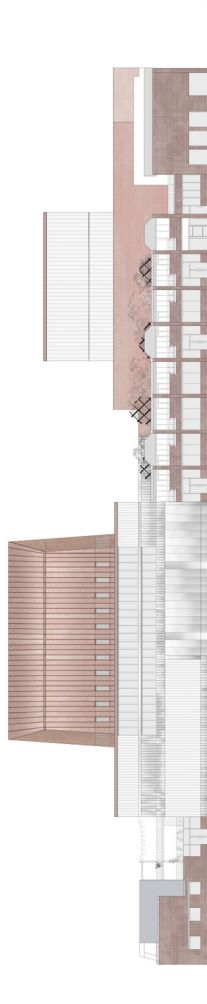
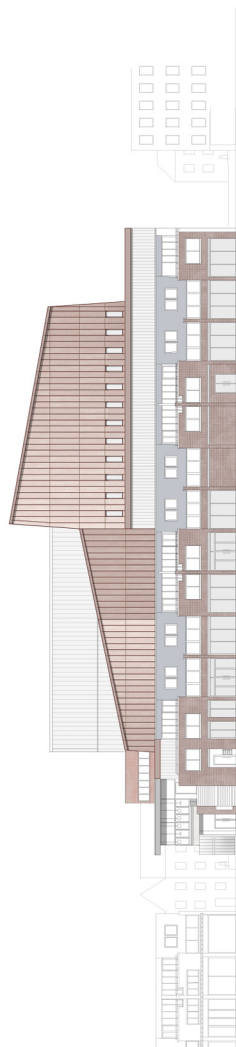
Daylight is rarely present in flytowers, making its introduction a distinctive feature of this theatre. The presence of natural light creates a more pleasant and supportive working environment for theatre staff, offering a rare quality within this type of space.





Materiality & Construction





The new structure clearly distinguishes itself from its surroundings. As described earlier, the existing urban fabric is predominantly characterized by red and brown brick facades. The facade of the project is limited to two primary materials, vertical zinc panels and glass channels, creating a simple and consistent architectural expression. The auditorium is treated as an autonomous volume, fully clad in vertical zinc panels that wrap continuously around both the walls and roof. It contains very few openings, emphasizing its monolithic character. The surrounding addition also incorporates U-glass and vertical zinc panels, but with a different finish.

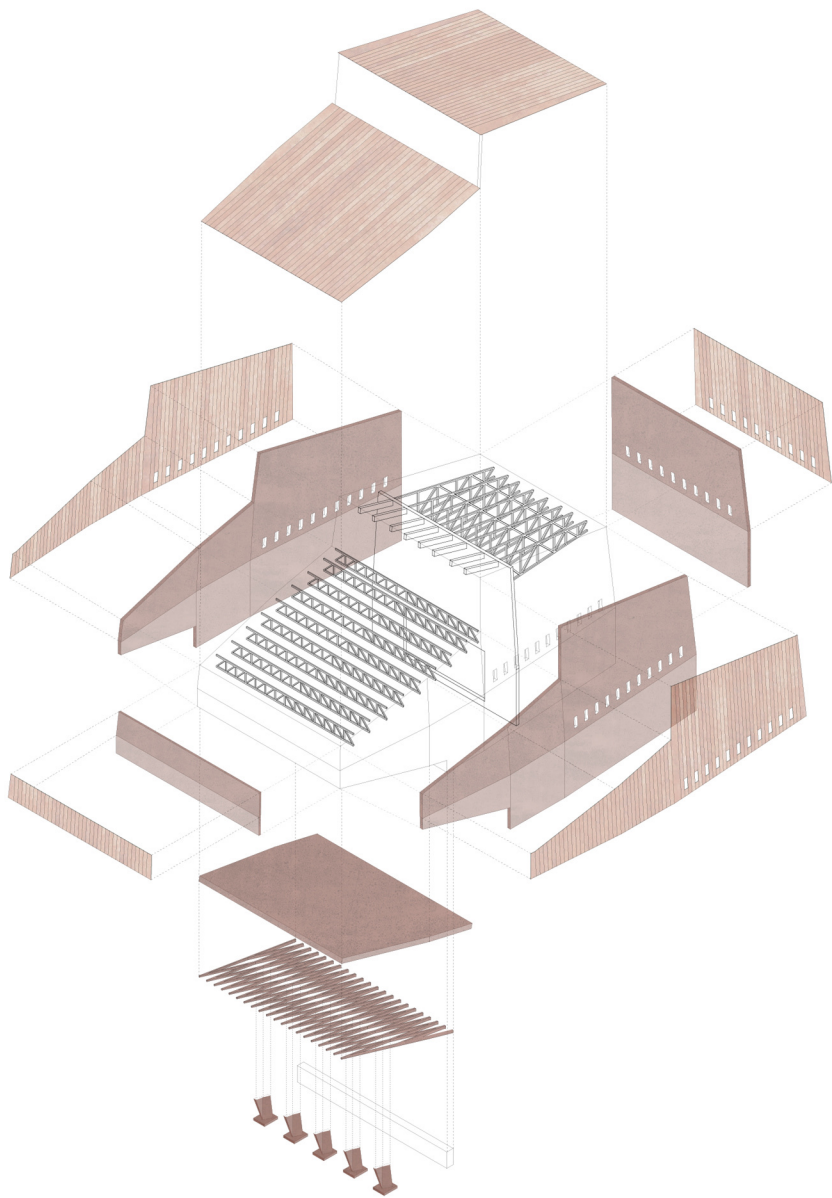
The zinc cladding of the auditorium has a copper-toned finish that complements the red and earthy tones found throughout the area. In contrast, the zinc finish of the surrounding building volumes is silver and more neutral, visually aligning with the channel glass. This distinction allows the auditorium to stand out as the primary architectural element.

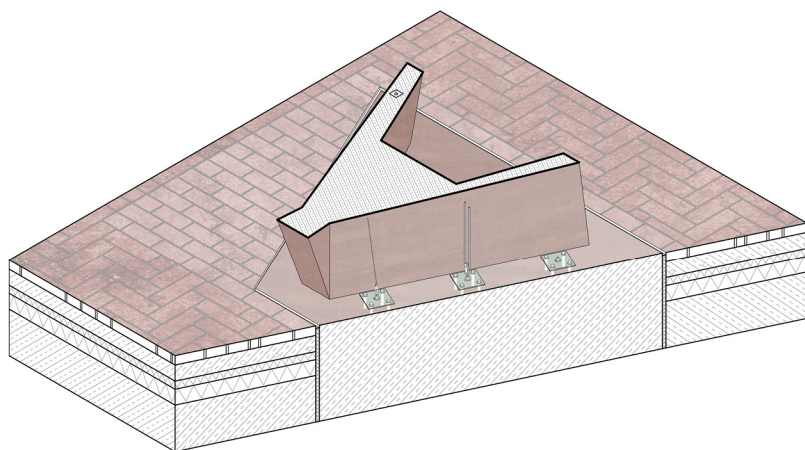
The strong vertical articulation of the facade is inspired by several buildings within the block, most notably the adjacent HEMA building. The new structure also responds to existing facade lines, particularly those that visually connect the two buildings. A long balcony running along the front facade creates a certain calmness within the facade. This approach relates to the HEMA facade, which similarly features a prominent horizontal concrete lintel extending across its full length.

The new structure conveys a more industrial atmosphere, reflecting its deliberately modest and functional character. At ground level, a series of small shops are introduced. These shops are enclosed by operable aluminium panels that fold open horizontally. When opened, the panels create a distinctive triangular form, establishing a visual dialogue with the adjacent pedestrian zone. As a result, the building immediately attracts the attention of passersby. Despite the large scale of the overall structure, the active ground floor creates a more human-scaled and welcoming experience.

The operable glazed facade located between the retail units follows the same industrial design language. The windows, measuring approximately 4.2 metres in height, fold open vertically to maximize openness and interaction with the public realm. The frames are made of aluminium and finished with a red coating that matches the paving material, which extends







seamlessly from the exterior into the building interior.

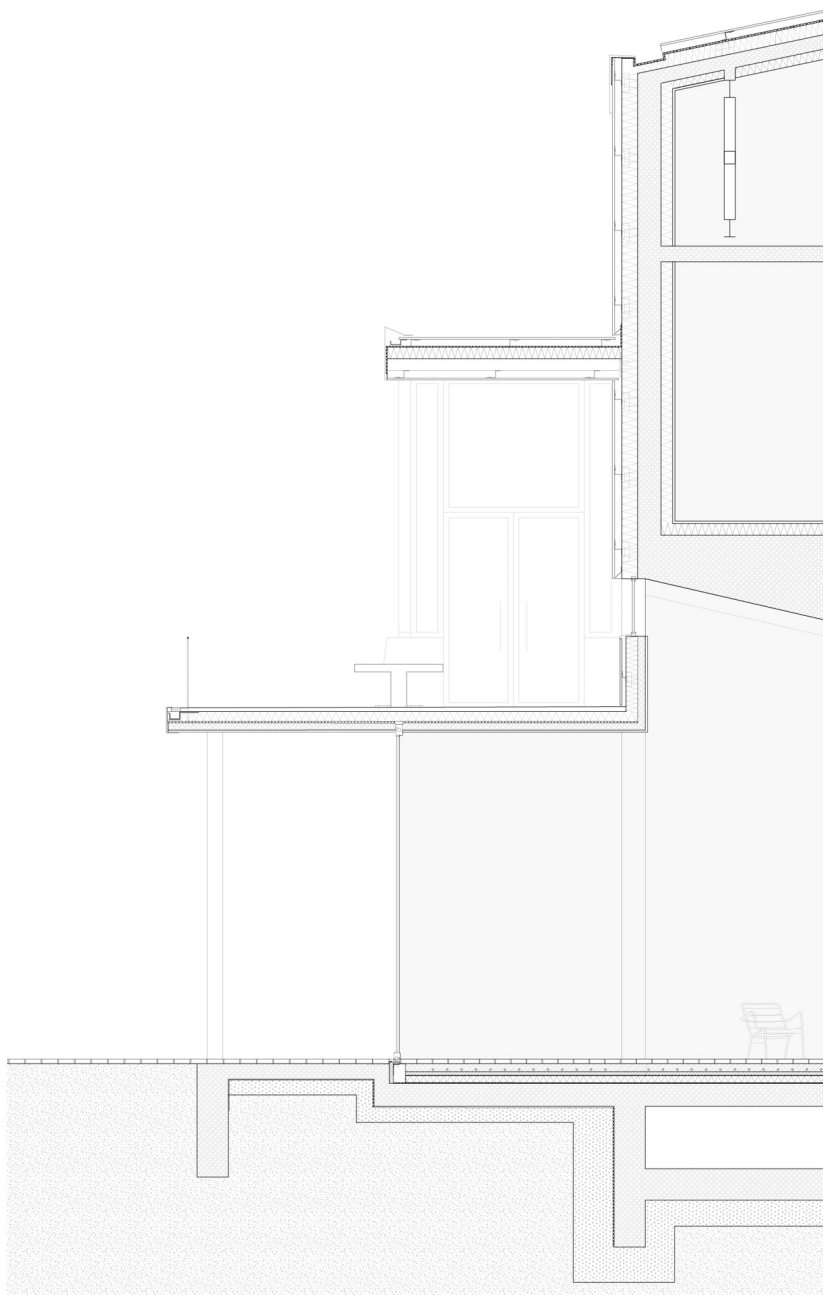
The interior materials follow the same concept as the facade. Elements associated with the auditorium are clearly distinguished from the rest of the building, reinforcing its identity as the central architectural volume.

As the auditorium is elevated above the ground floor, a substantial loadbearing structure is required to support it. The auditorium itself is constructed from reinforced concrete and incorporates steel trusses that span its full width, allowing for a column free interior space. Wherever the auditorium is visible from within the building, the exposed concrete is finished in a reddish-brown tone, reflecting its exterior appearance and complementing the interior colour palette.

Beneath the elevated auditorium, a series of massive concrete columns are prominently positioned within the foyer. These columns not only support the entire weight of the auditorium but also extend deep into the ground to transfer structural loads. At the same time, they serve as pieces of public furniture, becoming integral elements of the foyer's spatial experience.

At the base of each column, a square concrete flush plinth separates the structure from the surrounding brick flooring. This detail helps prevent sound and vibrations from the building from being transmitted through the columns into the auditorium above. In addition, the plinths are equipped with integrated mounting hooks, allowing temporary installations, exhibitions, and other functions to be attached. This makes the foyer highly flexible and adaptable to changing uses. Above the columns, the underside of the auditorium is deliberately exposed and treated as an architectural feature, transforming the ceiling into a visually engaging element within the foyer. The auditorium has a diamond-shaped plan, and the structural beams respond directly to this geometry by following its angled edges. This results in a distinctive cross-shaped beam arrangement that expresses the structural logic of the volume above.

The columns similarly respond to the geometry of the auditorium. Rather than being simple vertical elements, they align with the directional lines of the structure and are shaped to create a series of folded forms. Together, the beams and columns generate a sculptural ceiling landscape, enriching the spatial experience beneath the elevated auditorium. The remainder of



the building is supported by a combination of load bearing walls and timber columns, creating a clear distinction between the heavy, monumental structure of the auditorium and the lighter construction of the surrounding spaces.

On both sides of the auditorium, the facade is composed of silver zinc panels and glass channels. The zinc panels are 90 cm high and form a continuous plinth that supports the glass façade above. This horizontal line is carried through from the existing HEMA facade, creating a visual continuity across the block.

The plinth also serves a protective function, preventing potential damage to the glass channels. Positioned in front of the balcony, the glazing could otherwise be exposed to impacts such as kicked stones or other minor incidents by the users of the balcony.

Along the plinth, a long, minimal bench is introduced. This element allows visitors to rest while overlooking the pedestrian zone below, strengthening the relationship between the building and its urban surroundings.

The loadbearing glass channel facade on the first floor is insulated to achieve required thermal performance. The insulation consists of a white translucent material, which allows daylight to pass through and softly illuminate the foyer behind it.

Neighbours

The project is closely integrated into the surrounding urban fabric. The block in which the theatre is located is dense and defined by immediate neighbouring buildings. These neighbours are carefully considered and incorporated into the design strategy.

The new building has a large footprint and significant height. The apartment layouts are relatively simple and consistent, with all units following the same basic organisation. As described earlier, the apartments extend across the full width of the building, providing two primary orientations. The front side offers attractive views towards the canal or adjacent housing, while the rear side, where the entrance is located, is currently less pleasant. It overlooks a service courtyard used for deliveries and parking, and the bedrooms face this space.

The new design fully reconfigures this courtyard by covering and activating it, eliminating the remaining void. The residential access system is also unusual. From the street, residents enter the building and travel up to the first floor. At this level, they exit the building again to reach an access balcony located in the courtyard, where their apartment entrances are situated. On the northern building, the project extends this access balcony. The former courtyard is filled up to the level of the access balcony, transforming it into a large shared terrace that functions as a new collective outdoor space. This area is planted, creating a valuable green environment within the city centre. As a result, both the bedroom and entrance facing views for these apartments are significantly improved.

The residents of the southern building are more directly affected by the new intervention. The new structure is located approximately seven metres from their windows. Although it does not exceed the height of the residential building, its proximity makes it visually prominent. To improve living conditions, several interventions are introduced.

The access strategy for the southern building follows a similar logic to that of the northern building, but it serves two residential levels instead of one. The upper floor is accessed via individual staircases, resulting in eight separate stair cores. The existing access balcony, currently four metres wide, is expanded to seven metres. The individual staircases are replaced by a single communal staircase, strengthening the sense of community



among residents. From this staircase, a long shared balcony provides access to all apartments on the second floor. This balcony is generous enough to function as a communal terrace and outdoor living space. It is constructed from a steel structure, with load bearing columns and beams finished in the same blue tone as the existing facade. The space is partially covered to protect residents from rain, while certain elements remain movable to allow more daylight onto the balcony.

In addition, a new terrace is created as part of the theatre building itself. This terrace offers highquality outdoor space for residents of both the first and second floors and is oriented towards the south to maximize sunlight. The first-floor level, where the access balcony is located, is also reconfigured. A new plinth with an integrated bench is introduced, incorporating a planted flower bed. This creates a green edge that improves the view from the bedrooms of residents living on the first floor, offering a more pleasant and domestic outlook.



„Not a building but a town, where you find everything – lunch, great art, a library, great music“

Renzo Piano

Designing a theatre came with many unexpected challenges and felt unlike any other project. To be able to design a theatre properly, it was necessary to study and understand its internal processes and how the building operates. The infrastructure and logistics of a theatre are essential to creating a successful design. Theatres across the world operate in different ways, resulting in two main types: the receiving house and the producing house.

In Germany, where I grew up, almost all theatres have their own production teams and companies, resulting in large and complex building structures. At first, it therefore felt unusual that Theater de Veste was relatively small, had no production facilities, and did not host seasonal repertory shows. Instead, each event is almost a one-time performance. It was also noted that the theatre has limited engagement with the city and lacks the financial capacity to remain open during the day.

My initial instinct was to transform the theatre from a receiving house into a producing house. I assumed that expanding the internal programme would solve its financial challenges and that making the production process visible would strengthen its connection to the city of Delft. However, after further research into theatre systems in the Netherlands, it became clear that theatres do not function in this way. The Netherlands is a small country where cities are closely connected and easily reachable within half a day. Touring productions are therefore very common, with companies travelling efficiently from city to city without major logistical difficulties.

Following this realisation, it became clear that the theatre needed to engage with the city in different ways. Further research into contemporary theatre and public buildings highlighted the importance of accessibility and public engagement. After resolving the internal logistics of the building, including delivery processes, which are a key aspect of a receiving house, as well as the relationship between stage, auditorium, and site, the focus of the project shifted towards creating a cultural hub for the community of Delft.

Gradually, week by week, the design expanded across the site. The next challenge was to define the building's purpose within its urban context: what it offers to the people of Delft and who it ultimately belongs to. This included rethinking the existing HEMA store to create a clear threshold between the existing retail functions and the newly inserted theatre.

Over time, the internal organisation of the building became more resolved, but the exterior still lacked expression and meaningful engagement with its surroundings. Throughout the design process, careful attention was paid to the neighbouring context, ensuring that the project respects its surroundings and gives back to the city in a meaningful way.

The exterior eventually developed into an active and engaging ground-floor facade that responds to the adjacent shopping street. Although it sometimes felt as though the auditorium and core theatre functions became less dominant over time, the interior design was continuously refined through many iterations, improving its functionality, aesthetics, and atmosphere.

While the project still contains some imperfections, I believe it is driven by the right intentions and forms a meaningful contribution to the city of Delft, improving its social and spatial conditions.