

Final Graduation Reflection - Anton de Koning – Urban Architecture

Architecture as Dialogue: Designing with Invisible Voices

My graduation trajectory started with a strong sense of discomfort. Visiting the Blikfabriek, a creative hotspot in the middle of a socially vulnerable and multicultural neighborhood, made me feel the distance between well-meaning design communities and the everyday realities of the people who actually live there. Sitting around a campfire with mostly progressive, likeminded people felt strangely disconnected from the street just outside. That moment made it clear to me: I didn't want to design for people, I wanted to design with them. Especially with those who are usually not heard in the architectural process.

Because of that, I made a conscious decision not to pin down a fixed methodology from the start. I knew that working with people would require flexibility. My process was shaped by presence, trust, and trial and error. I began by exploring ways to meet people and build relationships in the neighborhood. Formal strategies helped a bit, but real access came through informal networks: the mosque, the social grocery store, SAAMO. These places were already part of daily life, and by volunteering there, I was slowly able to become part of that rhythm too.

Spending time in these spaces helped me understand context and build trust. From that, my research started to take shape. It grew into three parts: methods to meet, methods to participate and create, and the translation of those methods into design.

One of the most important things I learned is that there's no one-size-fits-all tool for participation. Some residents enjoyed talking, others preferred drawing or working with models. Being able to adapt to each person made all the difference. Over time, drawing and making became more than ways to gather information. They became a shared design language. Showing physical models and sketches helped residents see the consequences of their ideas and gave them a more active role in shaping the project.

The architectural design reflects this process. The social grocery store, for example, was directly based on conversations about what people needed, how big the space should be, and how it should relate to the public domain. The same goes for spaces for children, collective gardens, and informal meeting spots. My urban plan responds to these shared needs and combines them with references I studied on density, collective living, and the layering of public and private life. Through this, I've come to reflect more critically on how architecture supports daily life. How can we live together, share space, and still feel at home?

Throughout the process, feedback helped shape the work. After P1, someone told me my project could be "cooler." That was the moment I felt the freedom to stop holding back. After P2, I received strong feedback on the urban plan. It was well-developed, but there was still a missing link: how were people really involved in shaping it? Until that point, I had mostly gathered input. That critique pushed me to go further. I started organizing drawing sessions and model-making workshops. I also began bringing my own material into the process more actively. This helped make the design process a conversation rather than a presentation. It made the role of the residents more real.

At the same time, I began to understand that participation also has limits. People should shape the vision, the program, the needs. But design also needs focus, clarity, and synthesis. A plan is more than the sum of inputs. It requires spatial decisions, and sometimes those decisions can't

be made collectively. Instead of seeing that as a problem, I started to see it as part of the process. Being transparent about when to listen and when to act became key.

Looking back, I think the approach worked because I allowed space for doubt. I didn't pretend to know everything. I asked, I observed, and I stayed close to the questions. That allowed the design to become more responsive, more real. It also helped me understand better who architecture is for, and who still gets left out. I learned that tools alone don't make a process inclusive. It's about how you use them, and the attitude you bring into the room.

Looking ahead to P4

In the coming weeks, I'll focus on two things: making a strong and clear final book, and building a model that communicates the spatial logic of the project.

The booklet will be like a catalog. It will bring together methods, stories, sketches, design moments, and fragments of conversations. It's not just about showing what the result is, but how it came into being. I want the book to invite others into the process. To make it understandable and useful, also outside this one project.

Next to that, I'll build a physical model that shows the entire plan in a tangible way. It will show the layering of public, private, and collective space. I want the model to explain how the plan works spatially, in terms of rhythm, access, scale, and how people move through it. It should help people understand the atmosphere and structure in one glance.

This last phase is not about adding more. It's about sharpening, refining, and showing the project clearly, so that the work stands on its own.

Reflection on academic and social value

I believe this project contributes to current discussions about inclusive design, participation, and authorship. It also questions what it means to do "good" through design. Places like the Blikfabriek are often well-intentioned, but if they don't connect to the street outside, something is missing. This reflection isn't just about others. It's also about me. I had to confront my own assumptions and be willing to change course. That shaped both the research and the design.

On transferability

Even though this project is rooted in one specific neighbourhood, I believe the way of working can be applied elsewhere. Being present, working with existing networks, and staying flexible with tools, these are not bound to location. While the spatial outcomes are unique to this site, the process has a broader value.

A personal note

This year has made me think more critically about the culture within architecture education. I'm increasingly uncomfortable with how exhaustion, late nights, and emotional pressure are treated as normal. I've seen many peers break down. Some tutors notice this, but many still act as if it's just part of the deal.

I believe that when a student delivers something impressive, and it's clear they sacrificed their health to get there, that moment should be used to say: this is not okay. During P3, we all did an enormous amount of work. You could feel how intense it had been, and the results were strong. But the tiredness was written all over our faces. That should have been acknowledged. It

shouldn't be the expectation that we push ourselves to this limit every single time , P1, the urban plan in P2, P3, now P4, and soon P5. That pressure is not sustainable.

I know our tutors went through the same thing. And I don't blame them , this is not only their responsibility. It's up to us, the new generation, to break this cycle. If we want to create inclusive cities, we need to begin by changing the way we work and learn together. I want to be part of that change. Not just in words, but in action.

My two reflection questions

1. How can participatory tools avoid becoming symbolic gestures, and instead shape real spatial decisions?
2. How much of the architectural authorship can (and should) be shared, without losing spatial quality or clarity?