

# Designing for Co – Existential Spaces

The Case of Afrikaanderwijk.

P4 Reflection

MSc. Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences

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## Aspect 1: The relationship between research and design

The current thesis project relies on a constant dialogue between research and design. The design spatially demonstrates the opportunities transformed from the concepts and findings of the research. The design principles, for instance, which were used as guidelines for the design proposal, heavily rely on both the empirical data collected and on concepts, in which all research was based on. While also, the chosen areas for more specific interventions were based on the conclusions of the multi – scalar analysis done earlier, which illustrated the most potential sites for redesigning.

Acknowledging the concept of hyper – diversity in the context of Rotterdam South, the whole project was developed having this theory on the forefront. Taking this concept as a given, the proposed interventions advocated for transforming it into a quality, in deprived and segregated areas, where gentrification is considered to be the only logical “solution” to the posed challenges. The proposal ultimately provides a more local-based design alternative.

## Aspect 2: The relationship between your graduation (project) topic, the studio topic (if applicable), your master track (A,U,BT,LA,MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)

The Design of the Urban Fabric studio is, as the name implies, design –driven, focusing on urgencies such as social diversification, inequality and the economic crisis, with the aim of creating new urban transformation strategies. This focus aligns with the topic of my graduation project as it tries to shed a light on vulnerable and deprived neighbourhoods, and how neglect and gentrification processes result in social segregation and disparities. This thesis tried to highlight the necessity of turning hyper diversity, from a given to a quality, in order to create more inclusive and resilient cities for the future.

What is more, this project aligns both with the Urbanism master track of the MSc AUBS master program, as it tries to tackle the socio – spatial challenges of contemporary cities with urban design, aiming at a fairer and more sustainable urban development.

## Aspect 3: Elaboration on research method and approach chosen by the student in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry, reflecting thereby upon the scientific relevance of the work

This graduation project consists of a balance between research and design. Therefore literature and theories have formed the base of the problem setting and aim of this project and defined the structure of the course of the project. These theories have helped to make the topic more explicit and connect the theoretical foundation to the public space design.

Observational research was one of the most important tools used for the analysis and understanding the area. It helped to understand both the actual physical and social conditions of the site. It complemented the network and statistical analysis as GIS and statistical data were proven insufficient in terms of qualitative research. Thus, personal observation offered a way to inspect, for example, the dynamic of the area, the users of the different sites and how and when people occupied the space, when they came together and when they preferred to distance themselves from the community.

This type of research aligns also with the graduation studio methodological line of fieldwork. However, a posed limitation was the fact that the area was observed in depth during the winter months, following the time frame of the project, which implies that during the summer, people's activities and the image of certain spaces could possibly differ. In order to conduct a complete fieldwork study, interviews with civic associations and initiatives in Afrikaanderwijk were also planned. However, due to time limitations, this part of the research was not conducted, which could have probably resulted in more specific information about people's experiences and needs in the public space.

What is more, by means of research by design, another important methodological approach of the Urban Fabrics studio, design principles were generated, functioning as guidelines for the design interventions in the area. These principles are a combination of both theories and gathered data and information during the analysis and fieldwork from the project location and touch upon a wide range of different public levels. They are based on certain concepts or rather values about the area and at the same time, they are directly linked to specific social groups. The applicability and use of each principle is in the end linked to its spatial, cultural and political context. It is the context that decides which ones and how they are applied, but at the same time it was tried for them to also be transferable to other locations and situations.

#### Aspect 4: Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework, touching upon the transferability of the project results.

The scientific relevance of the project has to do with the fact that although a lot of literature exists in terms of how to design a public space, it is not really compatible with the current needs of a hyper – diverse society, especially when it comes to deprived areas.

This project aims to contribute and fill some gaps on how to design for different social groups and take into consideration their multiple identities and relations between one another, so that it can become clear that traditional one-size-fits-all policies, can no longer ensure a successful result. The outcomes of this project could function as a case study, or even better as a new vocabulary on how to create inclusive public spaces for different groups of people to co-exist.

From a societal point of view, this project could, through design, answer on multiplicity and create opportunities for people from different social groups to interact and communicate, thus creating a more inclusive and resilient environment, in places where conflicting interests and gentrification processes occur, at the expense of the most vulnerable. Those traditional processes of “regenerating” an area, have tried to prove that forcing social mixing is a bottom – up approach, which will benefit both the gentrified and non – gentrified communities of an area and create opportunities for all. The reality, however, has proven to be different, as in most cases these experiments end up failing.

Thus, this thesis, through spatial interventions, and taking into account the needs and identities of different social groups, aims at enabling the participation of people from different socio-economic statuses, lifestyles, attitudes and activities to interact and communicate, consequently steering the city towards fairer opportunity distribution and a more harmonious and co- existential urban environment.

Aspect 5: Discuss the ethical issues and dilemmas you may have encountered in (i) doing the research, (ii, if applicable) elaborating the design and (iii) potential applications of the results in practice

While the outcome of the research and design proposals only aimed at benefiting the local communities, several ethical aspects were considered throughout the process of materialisation;

While conducting fieldwork in the area, the residents consent as well as the confidentiality and anonymity (by default) had to be guaranteed, with the same applying to any pictures, videos and recordings during the observations. What is more, while conducting the analysis part, a very important aspect was not to convey any false information, especially about the socio – economic conditions of the area or establish a negative reputation about certain social groups. That is why a lot of time was spent on very carefully observing the conditions of the area, to testify the legitimacy of the information and vice versa.

As far as the design outcome is concerned, when dealing with a hyper – diverse area and trying to create spaces for co – existence, the actual needs, expectations and experiences that every different person has, should be taken into consideration at all times, while also keeping in mind that the area has to be able to welcome new residents in the coming years, with their own, different requirements. However, due to the limitations of the current thesis project, compromises had to be made that sometimes may have led to a simplification or generalization of certain aspects and design decisions.

To conclude, it is crucial for any proposal to be successfully applied in the area to first ensure an open and active dialogue amongst the key involved stakeholders, like the municipality of Rotterdam and the current residents, so that conflicting interests and ideas are taken into account in the process.