play

between the play of everyday life and architecture to play

graduation book

Urban Architecture
graduation studio
2024 / 2025

Noortje Kemme

In Rotterdam, I walk from my house to the supermarket several times a week. I then cross a square[1] decorated with a music dome, playground equipment, a wall in the same design language as the swings and a pavilion with photos that refer to the history of this 19th-century square that has been redesigned several times. Although the wall in that square is often used as a goal, I once saw two boys who used the street in front of their house to play football. Whether they just passed or whether one tried to score against the other, did not immediately become clear to me. If I stood still for longer, I would become a passive and unwanted participant in their game. After all, I was in their playing field, which probably consisted lengthwise of the facades opposite each other, and several doors and windows in width.

In Zürich, I walked daily from my house to the train station to work. I crossed the road and came to a car-free area[2] where I walked on or past a running track, which often aroused the feeling to run. The space is vast and rectangular, yet open and accessible for people to appropriate it temporarily. Every weekend, families gathere around the red picnic tables under the copper beeches to celebrate birthdays and let their children play in those trees, on the chrome objects, on the park's lawn and on bikes covering the spacious terrain. And not just kids - seniors use the field for their weekly croquet competition, for instance.

The situations described initially highlight the joy of meandering through and to locations within walking distance from my home. I often revisit these places either as part of a purposeful activity or simply to enjoy the pleasant environments at different times. I have come to realise that once I leave my house alone, I enter a "playful state of mind", which is an element of play as described by Peter Gray. "Your play state may be triggered by an object, another person, an activity, or a combination of these; the triggers are different for everyone."[3] Because play is so varied, the intention here is not to provide an absolute definition, but rather to offer insights into its characteristics, drawn from a range of textual sources.

A source often referred to is *A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga.[4] He describes play as

> "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life, being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy."[5]

Play is voluntary, something you do because you like it. Because of that freedom, it can be postponed or left behind at any time, Huizinga states. Yet, it is also indispensable because it decorates life.[6] Friedrich Schiller even asserted that play is intrinsic to the very essence of being human. "In play we find the origins of self-consciousness, and hence freedom, and hence morality."[7] Likewise, when playing, our unique individuality is expressed.[8]

In the next pages, following on from this introduction, the notion of play will be further unravelled through seven terms or chapters that can be explored in arbitrary order.

improvisation
movement
structure
freedom
imagination
pleasure for its own sake
outside the ordinary

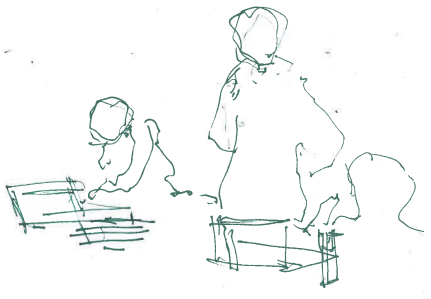
notes

1. Peinackerplein, Rotterdam, NL.
2. Traugott Wahlenpark, Oerlikon, Zürich, CH.
3. See: https://nifplay.org/what-is-play/the-basics/#.
4. Originally published in 1938.
5. Quoted by Stuart Brown, 2009, p. 20.
6. See point two in Huizinga, 1952: [1: it is a free activity, 2. it is not the ordinary life, 3. it is confined, 4. it creates order, it is order].
7. Quoted from David Graeber, 2014, p.14 [refering to Friedrich Schiller work *On the Aesthetic Education of Man,* originally published in 1975].
8. Stuart Brown, 2009.

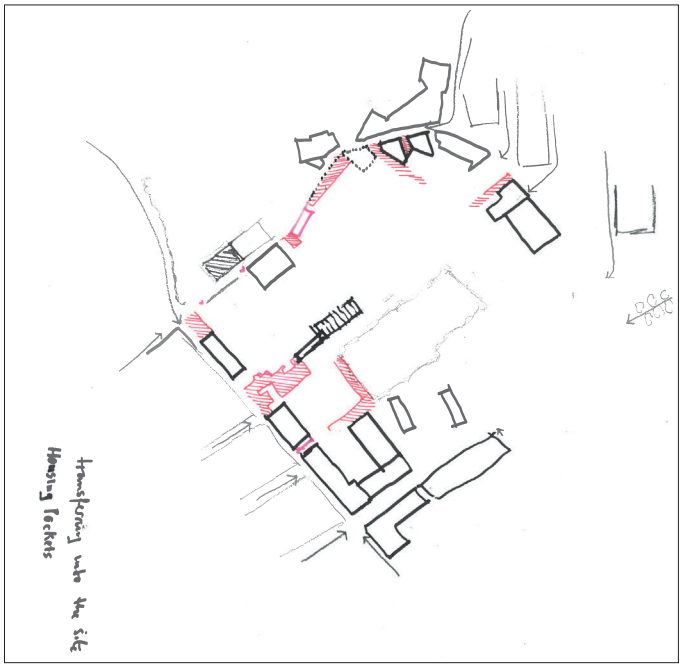
As designer Floris Hovers puts it, “play often simply means starting.”[1] How? By reading and taking notes? “Why not use play as a way to sharpen your perception of a place? Why wouldn’t you just go outside? Shall we draw?”[2] But what to draw, how to draw a phenomenon? How to see moments of play?

Thinking of Francis Alÿs’ city walks, which are small performative actions with a clear starting point and are guided by a rule or game.[3] And thus, spending fifteen minutes drawing windows, followed by fifteen minutes drawing doors.

Maybe, playing is not thinking too much, but rather doing. Improvisation.



“Shall we draw?”



tracing residential compartments at the Lageweg area as a matter of “playing is often just starting”

Paradox of Praxis I (sometimes making something leads to nothing) © Francis Alÿs

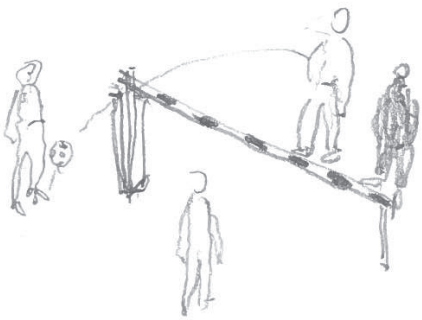
The Cambridge Dictionary describes this noun as “a performance that an actor, musician, etc. has not practised or planned” and as “the act of making or doing something with whatever is available at the time”[4], which aptly aligns with the masterplan’s design phase. Interacting with a 1:333 site model, through which the site becomes tangible for the first time, despite earlier visits. Taking away a hall and receiving an immediate response, taking intuitive decisions, while a hall can always be put back in place as the playing evolves. But also deciding what to keep by assessing existing structures and prioritising strong facades and spatial quality. Retaining as much as possible, with an ‘after-demolition plan’ titled as the new existing. Introducing verticality to complement the horizontal character of the factory halls.

volumes to (re)place

after-demolition plan, new existing for proposed masterplan

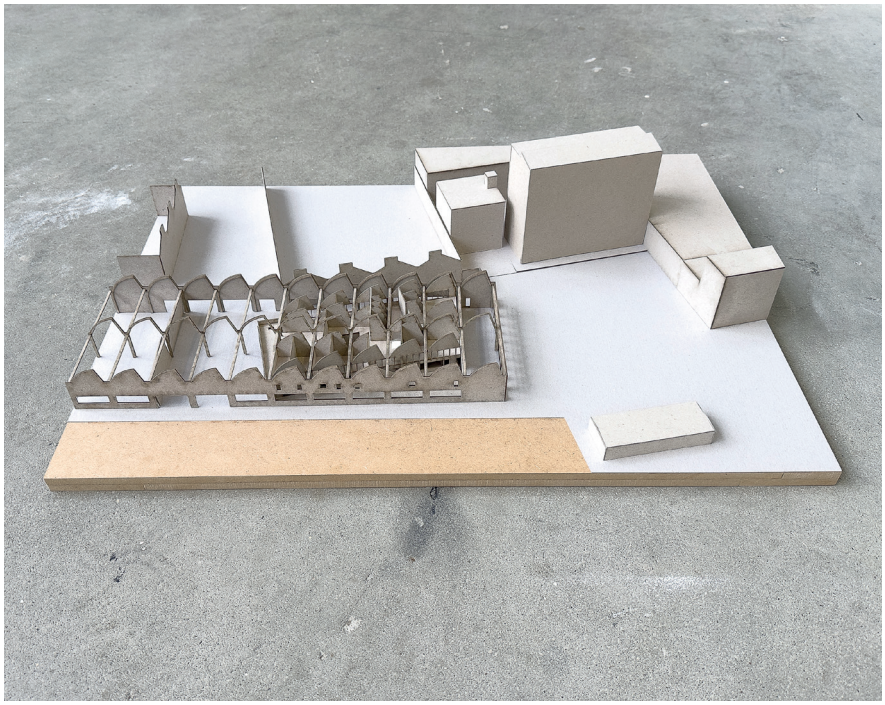
Improvisation as an attitude. As in the renovation of a former printing complex for the socio-artistic organisation Zinneke - a pilot project focused on the reuse of materials. A process plan instead of a defined design. No detailed drawings, but "interventions were specified textually, with notes such as: 'a second-hand window will be installed here.'"[5] Improvising to deal with the dynamic exchange between stakeholders, but also the as found of an existing building and available materials.

Can this strategy of ad hoc[6] be integrated in my design, and subsequently, in the usage of the building? A way to embrace uncertainty, the unplanned, the unfinished, and the spontaneous.

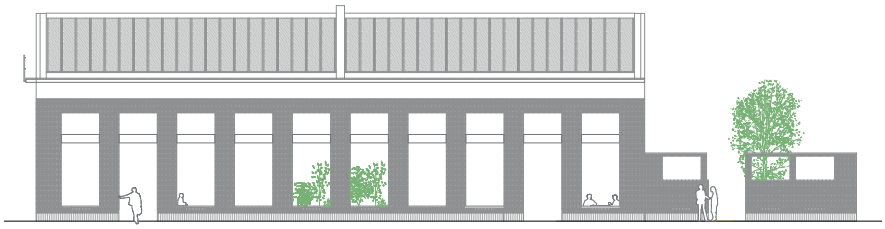


project Zinneke, Ouest Architecture, Rotor © Delphine Mathy

"Adhocism consists of a general and loose approach to a problem rather than a tight and systematic one."[7]



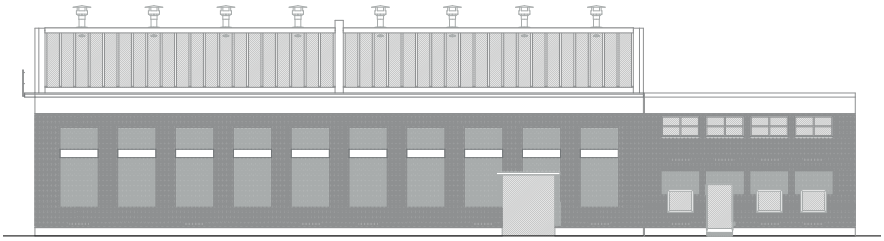
A healthcare centre naturally demands high standards of hygiene and comfort. In addition, the programme includes many specific rooms, such as treatment spaces, making it impossible to deliver an incomplete building. Yet an existing structure can offer certain clues that the design can respond to. In this case, a surplus of space allows the front bay[8] to remain physically open and raw. The waiting area subsequently offers little instruction on how to wait, while also serving as the entrance and circulation zone. In the spirit of adhocism, this ambiguity acknowledges difficulties and opens the space to interpretation - allowing its users to interact with its environment as a form of play.[9]



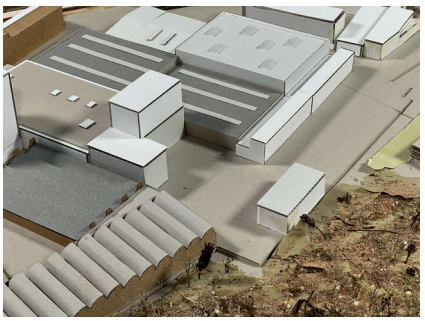
notes

1. Quoted from interview by Jasmijn Kam. See: https://galleryuntitled.nl/2022/12/13/tegengif-kleur-en-beton/.
2. Question posed by research tutor Leeke Reinders, 27/11/2024.
3. See: https://francisalys.com/sometimes-making-something-leads-to-nothing/.
4. See: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/improvisation.
5. Quoted from Klaske Havik, 2024, p.177.
6. dsf
7. Quoted from Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, 1972, p.16.
8. The first bay is transformed into a portico and defines one side of the square.
9. See **freedom**.

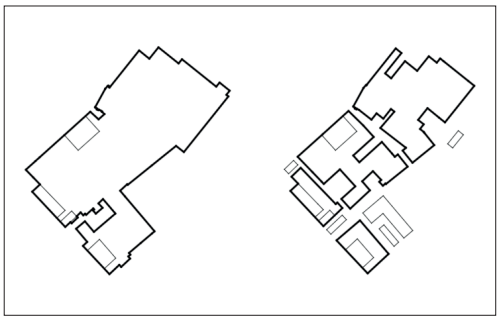
as found



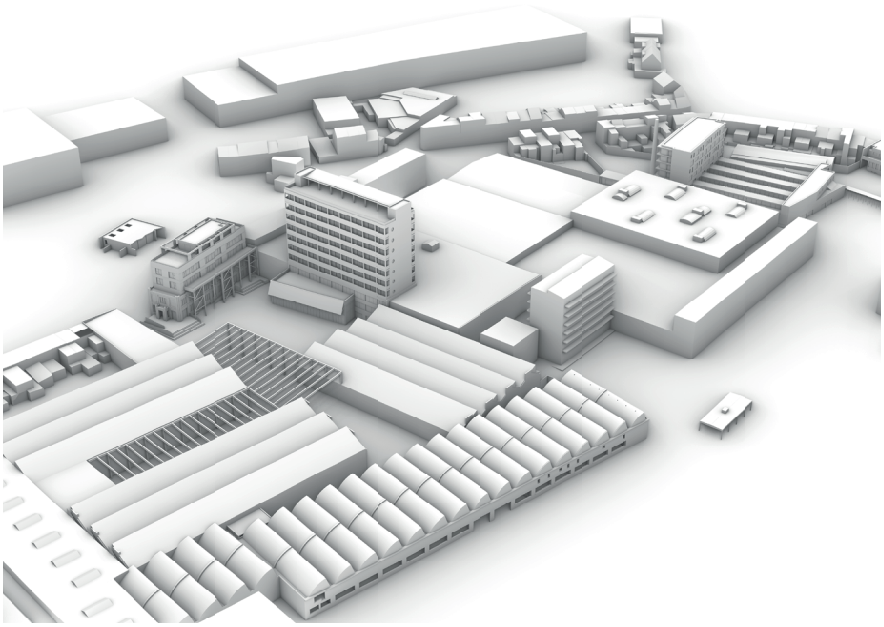
In the urban plan, passages through the site were enabled through extending former entrances, whereby one outdoor space comes after the other. Thus, these trajectories become like a sequential game. This does not mean that the sequence should be linear since that often implies prioritisation. Instead, we should create “narrative spaces” that allow for dissonance, as Richard Senna, writer of the book Designing Disorder, proposes.



selected site for architectural project



existing_proposed



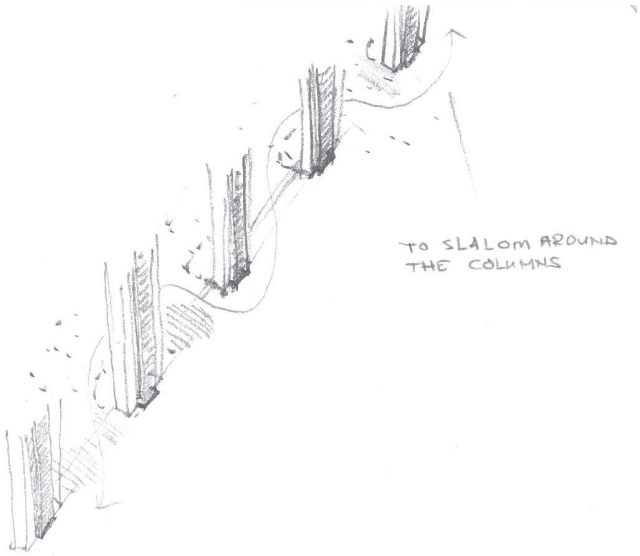
axonometric view of project site with three developed architectural projects

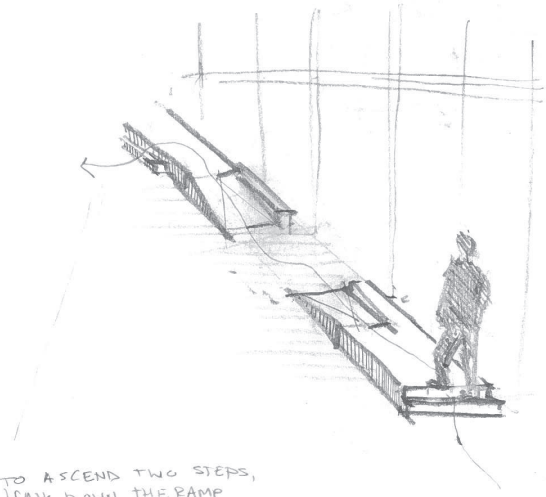
Each visit to the Blikfabriek brings a new set of experiences shaped by the events that take place there. The courtyard is a lively outdoor space as found, that is taken care of by the tenants.

This brings to mind the concept of commoning: shaping social relationships in ways that support the collective and sustain the porosity of the space. It offers a starting point for how new public squares in this area could operate. To let them "gradually transform at is own pace", for instance.

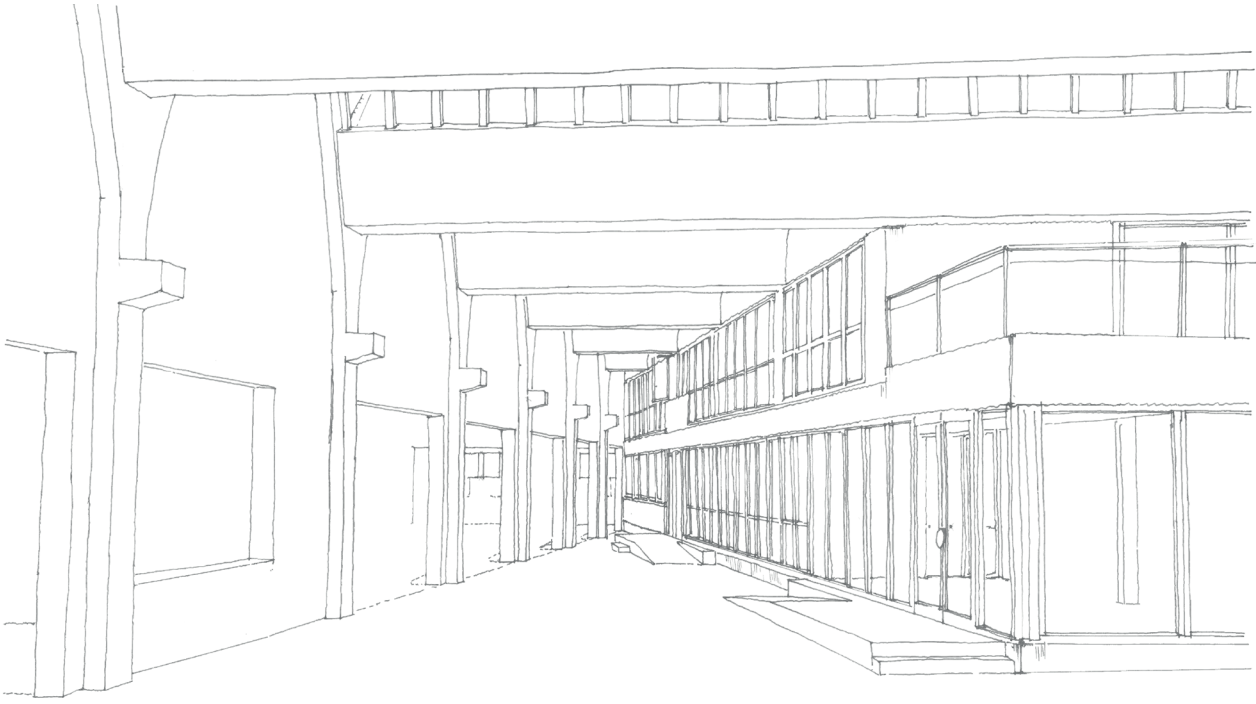
masterplan with three developed architectural projects

A building within a building — creating space for play. To move through the hall that once was an aluminium foundry. To slalom between the columns, or wander up and down the ramps. Just for the joy of it.

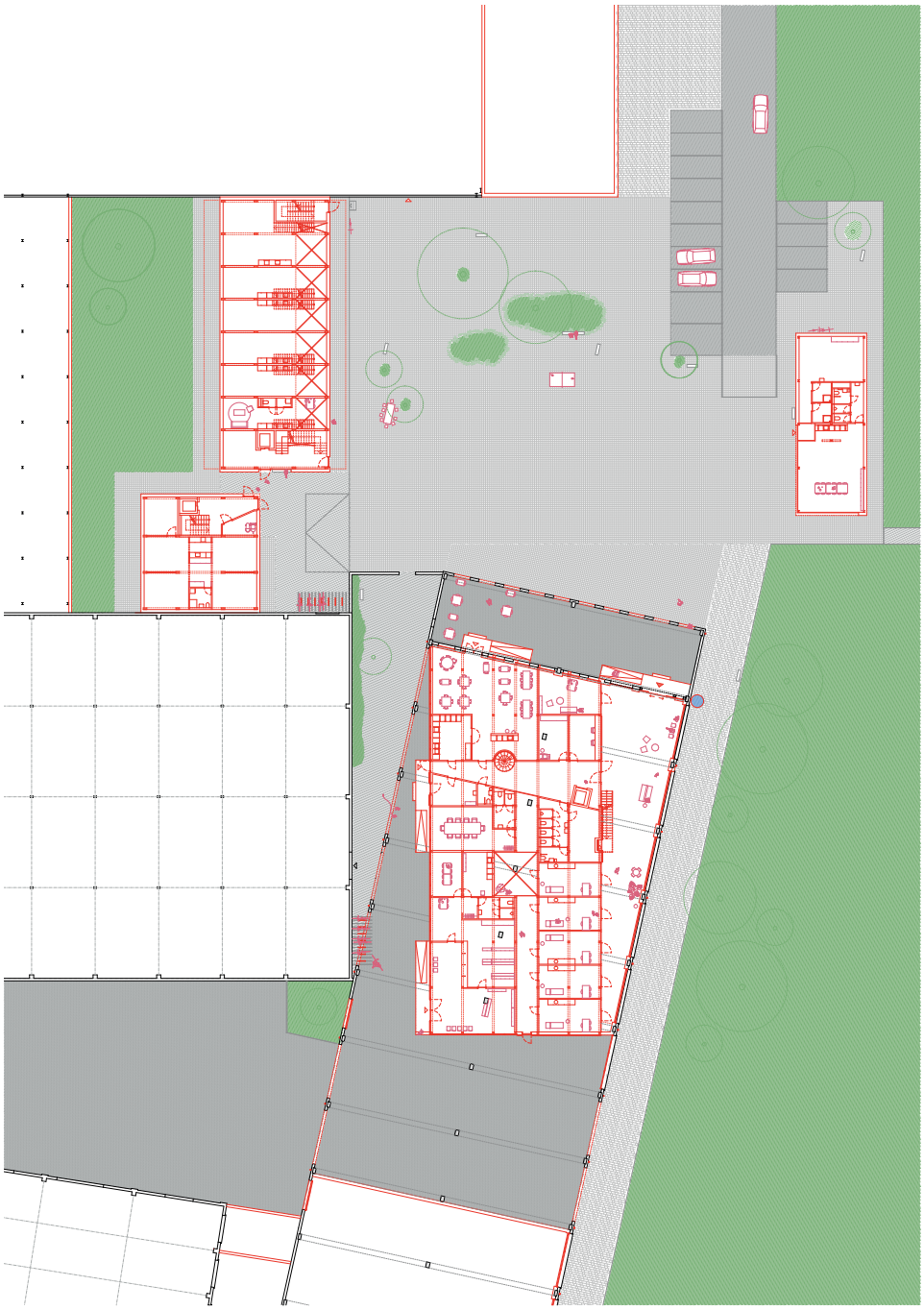




TO ASCEND TWO STEPS,
WALK DOWN THE RAMP
ALONG THE FACADE,
ASCEND THE RAMP,
AND DESCEND TWO STEPS AGAIN.



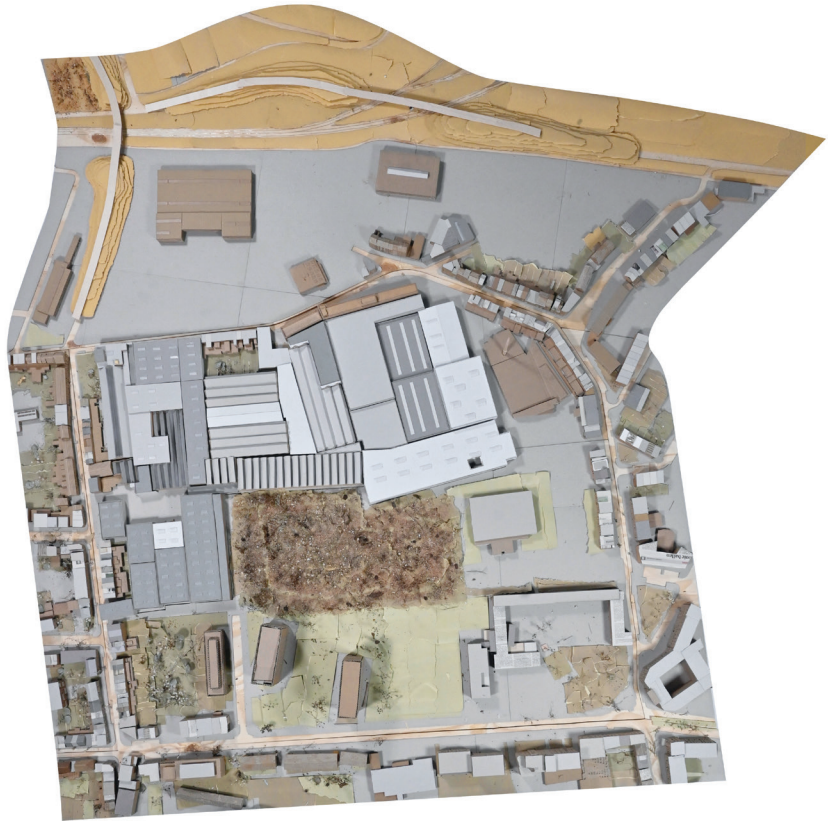
street



Returning to the work of Johan Huizinga, “every game moves within its play space, which, whether physical or imagined, intentionally or naturally, is pre-defined.”[1] If so, the play space needed to be bounded for the master planning to unfold. Thus, a site model as an interactive tool was to be built. First, roughly demarcating its scope, offsetting the Lageweg area[2] beyond just across the street. Then, dividing the group into three, each responsible for either the base plate, the factory buildings, or the surrounding buildings. Decisions about the model’s representation and its construction were informed by the desire to modify the model, and mostly with materials that can be collected within the faculty. Despite its size, the model had to be easily movable. As such, six segments were drawn on the centre lines of streets and plot lines. Buildings were made by tearing (leftover) paper and cutting cardboard, some taped and others loosely put on the plate. Greenery was added during collective sessions where sandpaper was torn and trees were placed by drilling small holes - an activity enjoyed for its social dimension as well.

In other words, an established structure - the model with its own set of rules - enabled play to begin, in this case with building volumes: demolishing, reconfiguring, and constructing.[3] At the same time, interventions take place within a given medium-sized urban context, prompting the question from the very beginning of the graduation year: what can I, as a designer, play with? What are the (unwritten) rules of what already exists? By doing fieldwork, you gradually come to understand the playing field- not only in a physical sense, but also socially, historically, and spatially. You begin to see where there is room to move, where limitations lie, and how existing structures operate. In this way, the site is not just something to be observed, but something you develop a relationship with. Moreover, this recognition of “how the place works” should be the initial step toward transforming “closed boundaries, which are limits with no interaction between two sides, into permeable borders, which are full of exchange”, as Richard Sennet suggests.[4] Despite De Blikfabriek acting as a void within the rigid enclosure, the former industrial complex was still perceived as a boundary within the residential patchwork of Hoboken. The urban vision emerged by accepting the mass while also penetrating it - carving out volumes by, among others, reopening former entrances to enable passage through the site.

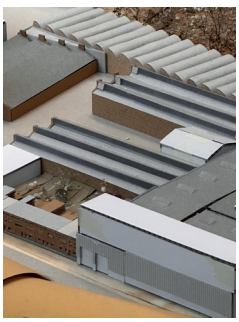
six plates to be moved around



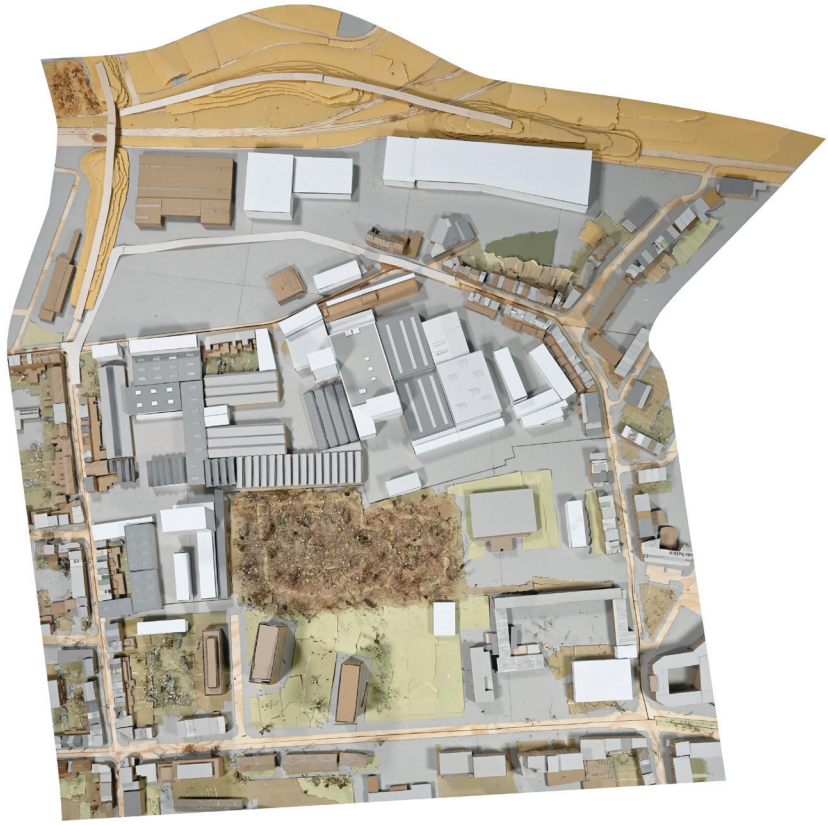
1:333 piecemeal site model, existing_what to keep?_collaborative work of 30 students

The site, at first rigidly enclosed and fragmented, lacked access and neighbourhood vitality. By opening up deadend streets and demolishing selected industrial buildings, we create a porous landscape, revealing hidden potentials within the existing fabric. This “new existing” shapes our interventions - adding public spaces and introducing new buildings of which a few high points mark trajectories crossing the site. A rerouted Lageweg, separated by a green flood buffer, redirects heavy traffic, while a decentralised program enriches the residential areas with cultural, educational, and social facilities, fostering openness, connection, and places for everyday encounters.

The chosen fragment lies at the western border of the site along Lageweg. It highlights a moment of transition in program, scale and accessibility. A private row house neighbouring an old industrial hall which has been repurposed into an urban sports facility represents the diversity of the found situation and proves the feasibility of programmatic diffusion in close proximity.



1:33 overlap fragment model, existing

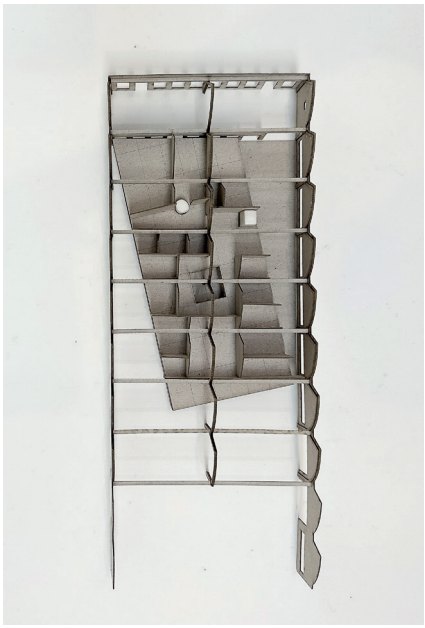


1:333 piecemeal site model, proposed masterplan

So, play is infused with rules - some determined in advance, others taking shape during the course of the activity. And perhaps, when play is no longer enjoyable, the rules can be bent or broken, or a new game begins. How about a triangular bed? It does not follow the standard dimensions of 180 by 200 cm, but think about what a different space is created...

Initially, the triangular building attached to the hall was preserved. The squeezed building had a facade[5] to a new square, which could be restored. But what if the space became outdoor space again - a patio for the employees? A next step: what if it became a shortcut to the square - an alley or street, as I prefer to call it. In that case, the facade of the neighbourhood healthcare centre would need to be located within the existing masonry walls. First in line with the structure, then running parallel along the opposite edge of the triangle. A diagonal line, how would that work in a dominating structure with trusses and curved roofs? It is maybe not so ideal. But is ideal the aim?[6]

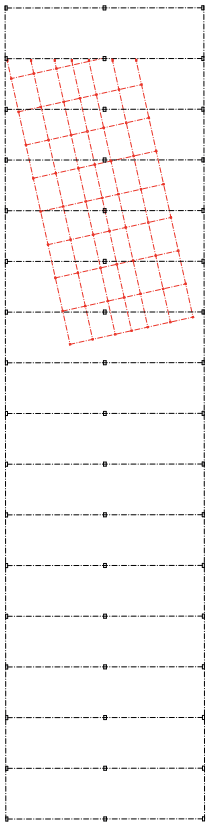
triangular bed © Sem Chermayeff



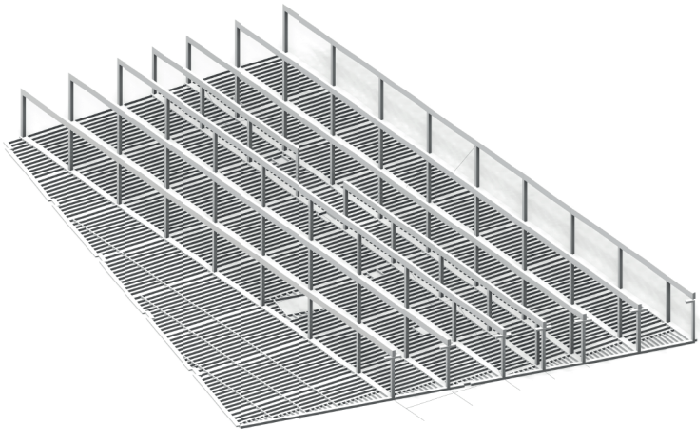
1:200 model to spatially 'freeze' the floor plan

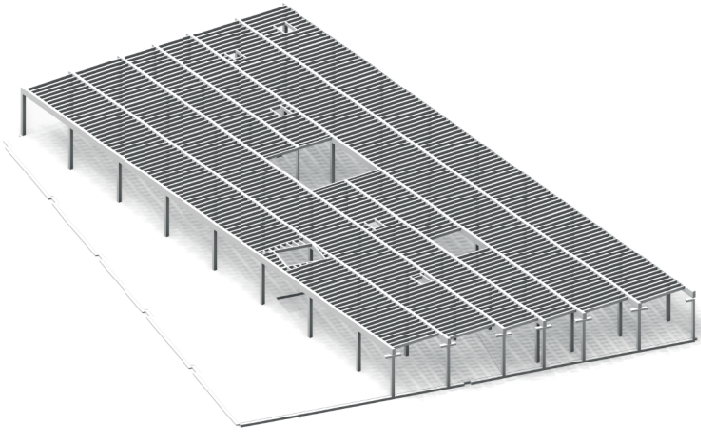
ground floor plan >

The more closely you study the building, the more you begin to appreciate it, despite its signs of decay, and you no longer wish to erase its architectural experience through what you add to it. However, characteristic of the building is the horizontal windows in the southeast facade versus the roofs' northeastfacing window strips. In response to this difference in orientation, a shift and rotation between the ground floor and first floor is proposed. This allows two grids to overlap and results in a playful choreography between windows, columns and walls. It changes the way you perceive the existing structure.[7]



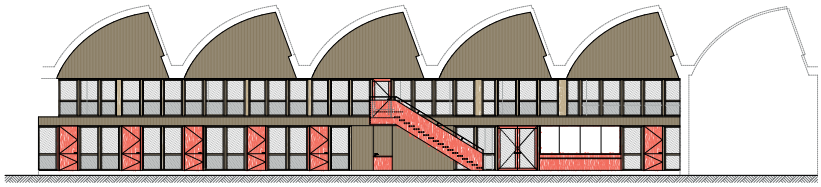
structural diagram >





Inside a rigid concrete structure with a 7.45-meter grid, a new structure is inserted that isn't aligned with the existing grid but instead runs parallel to a nearby building. The façades wrap around the timber core, creating the perception of a single, unified volume. Yet, difference in temperature, sunlight and humidity will change (lighten) the colour of the hempfibre corrugated sheets. This results, along with the fact that each facade faces a different opposing facade within the hall, in a distinct atmosphere on every side - creating a variety of public spheres around the volume.

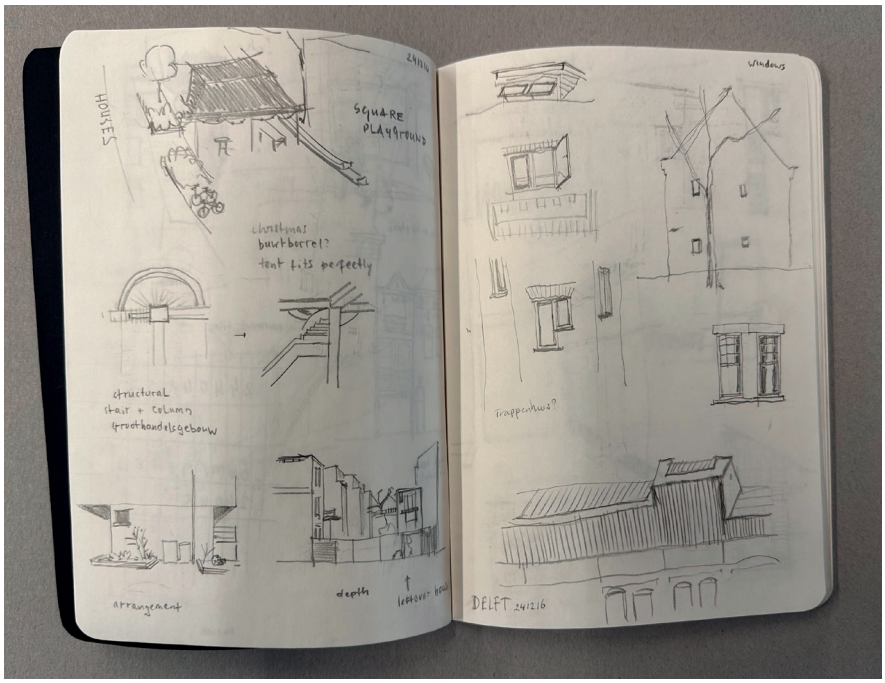
Oh and the red? It is the interior, and it hightlights, amongst others, the doors that provide access to the consultation rooms.

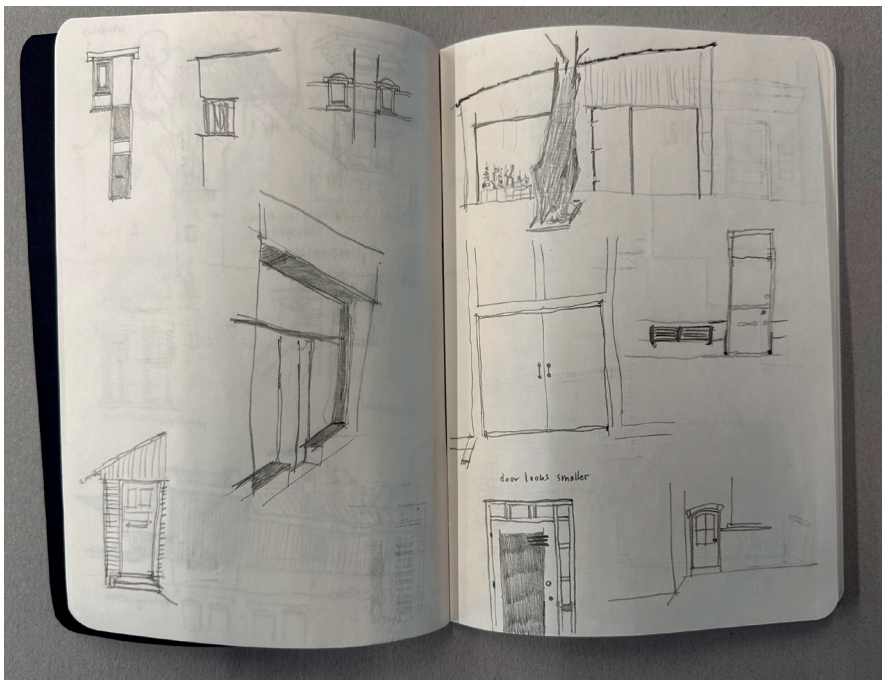


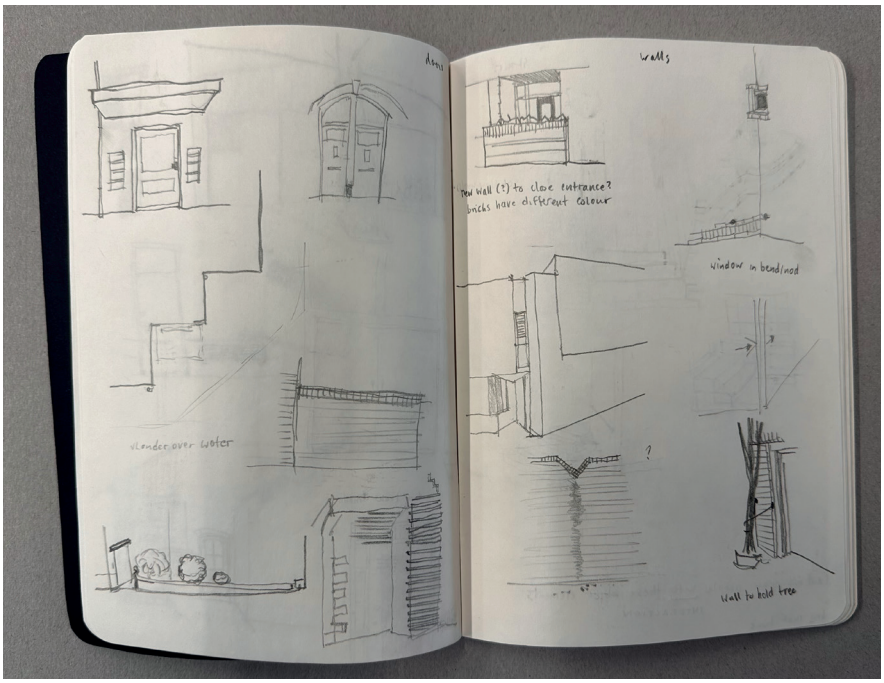
notes

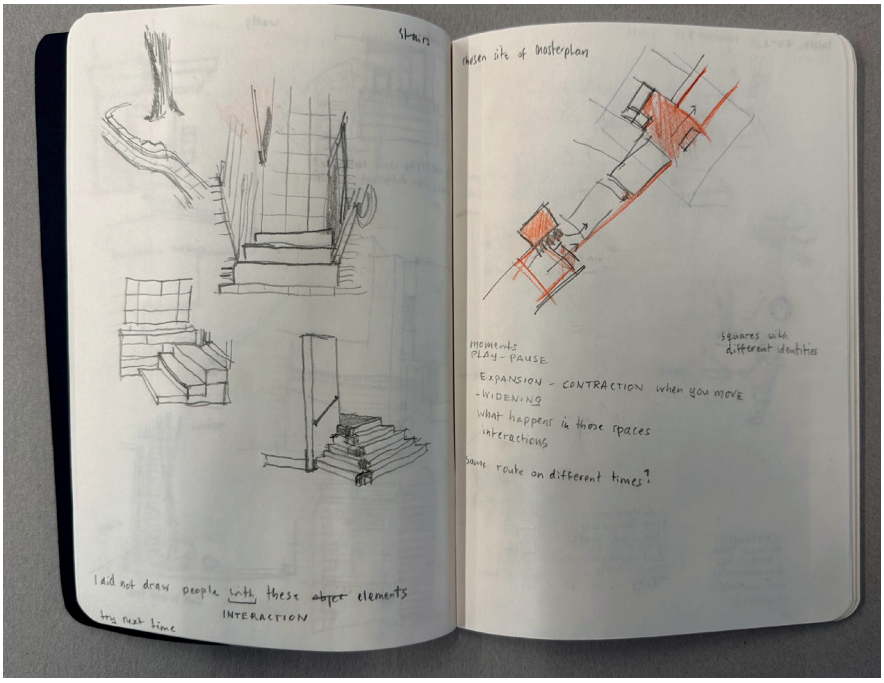
1. Huizinga, 1952, p. 20
2. This year's site of the Urban Architecture graduation studio is located in the patchwork of Antwerp's district Hoboken, in the periphery's periphery where industry, a can factory and a rim factory, left the stage two decades ago and artists and cultural entrepreneurs - urban pioneers - moved in the southern part from 2018 to transform vacant halls into a unique but temporary place (De Blikfabriek).
3. See **improvisation**
4. Pablo Sendra and Richard Sennet, 2020, p.71
5. .
6. Question posed by Benjamin Groothuijse during P3 feedback, 28/03/2025
7. See **imagination**

rule: drawing windows, doors, walls and steps; 15 min each



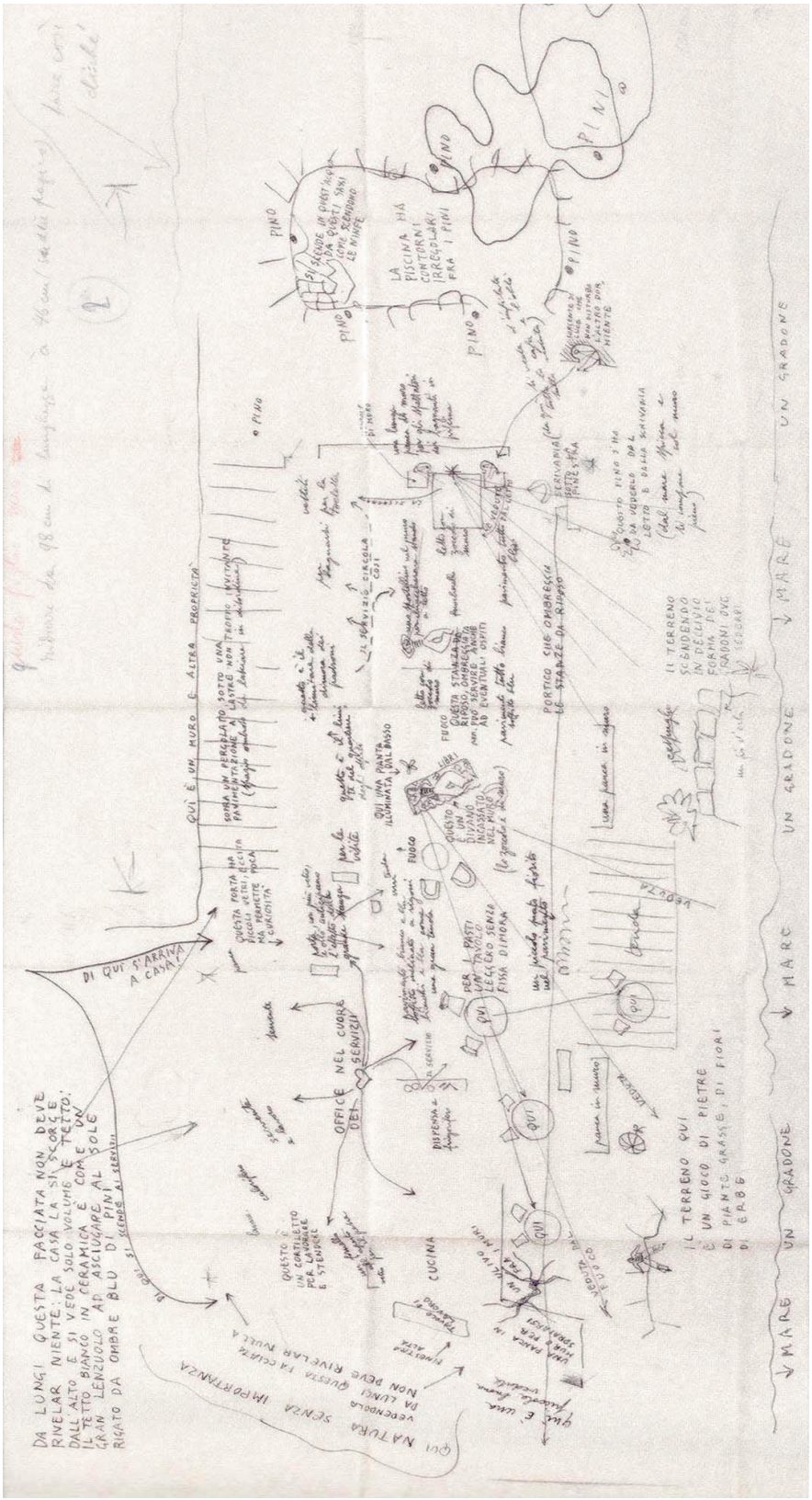



doors
walls
new wall (?) to close entrance?
bricks have different colour
window in bend/road
blender over water
?
wall to hold tree


stairs
chosen site of masterplan
squares with different identities
moments
PLAY - PAUSE
EXPANSION - CONTRACTION when you move
- WIDENING
what happens in those spaces
interactions
same route on different times?
I did not draw people with these objet elements
INTERACTION
try next time

Without any walls, but with moments and intentions. On how a space could be inhabited. Because, ultimately, the aim is to incite play for the user and not only for the designer. To give freedom to play.

Villa Marchesano, 1938 © Courtesy Gio Ponti Archives >


DA LUNGI QUESTA FACCIATA NON DEVE RIVELAR NIENTE: LA CASA LA SI SCORGE DALL'ALTO E SI VEDE SOLO VOLUME E TETTO: IL TETTO BIANCO IN CERAMICA È COME UN GRAN LENZUOLO AD ASCIUGARE AL SOLE RIGATO DA OMBRE BLU DI PINI
DI QUI S'ARRIVA A CASA!
QUI È UN MURO E ALTRA PROPRIETÀ
QUESTA PORTA HA PICCOLI VETRI, ECCITA MA PERMETTE POCA CURIOSITÀ
OFFICE NEL CUORE DEI SERVIZI
QUESTO È UN CORTILETTO PER LAVORARE E STENDERE
CUCINA
QUI NATURA SENZA IMPORTANZA
VEDENDOLA DA LUNGI QUESTA FACCIATA NON DEVE RIVELAR NULLA
PINO
PINI
LA PISCINA HA CONTORNI IRREGOLARI FRA I PINI
IL SERVIZIO CIRCOLA COSÌ
QUESTA STANZA DA RIPOSO, OMBREGGIATA NON PUÒ SERVIRE ANCHE AD EVENTUALI OSPITI
PORTICO CHE OMBREGGIA LE STANZE DA RIPOSO
FUOCO
QUI UNA PIANTA ILLUMINATA DAL BASSO
QUESTO È UN DIVANO INCASSATO NEL MURO
PER I PASTI UN TAVOLO LEGGERO SENZA FISSA DIMORA
IL TERRENO SCENDENDO IN DECLIVIO FORMA DEI GRADONI OVE SEDERSI
IL TERRENO QUI È UN GIOCO DI PIETRE DI PIANTE GRASSE, DI FIORI DI ERBE
MARE UN GRADONE
MARE UN GRADONE
MARE UN GRADONE

how to wait, what to offer? a bit of uncomfort?

the waiting area offers little instruction on how to wait, while also serving as the entrance and circulation zone

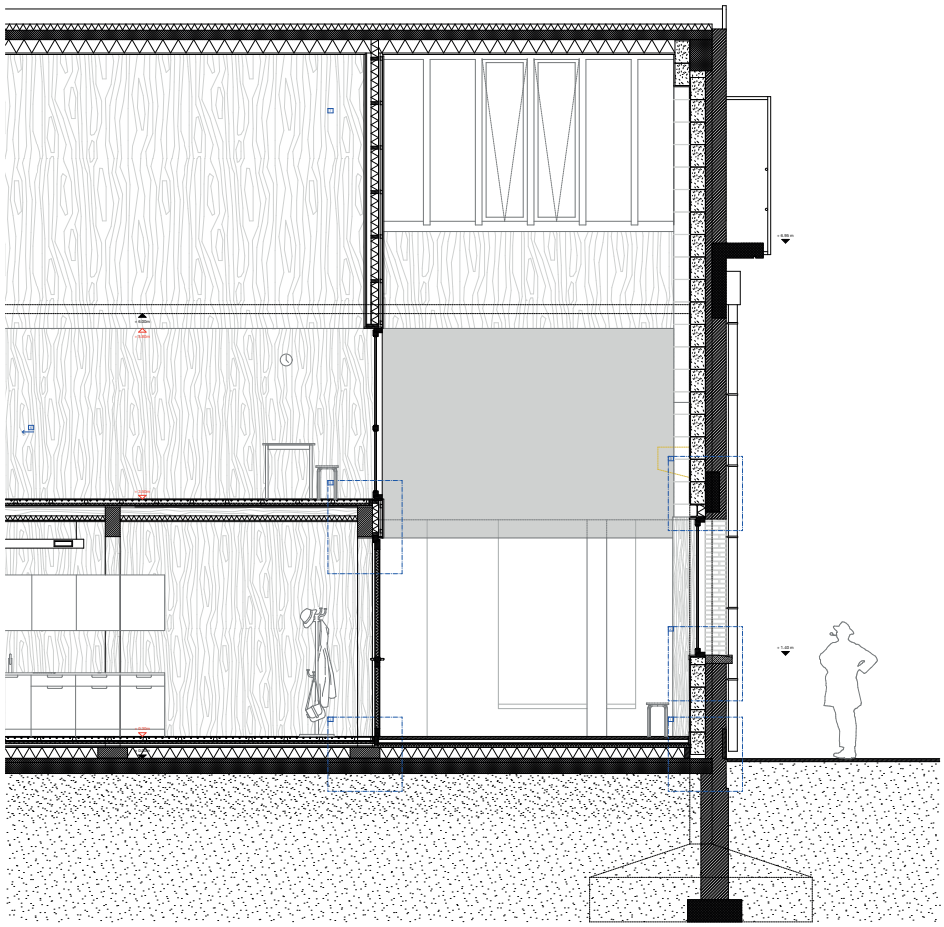
Seeking Comfort in an Uncomfortable Chair © Bruno Munari

"Affordances are possibilities for action provided to us by the environment."

The End of Sitting © RAAAF

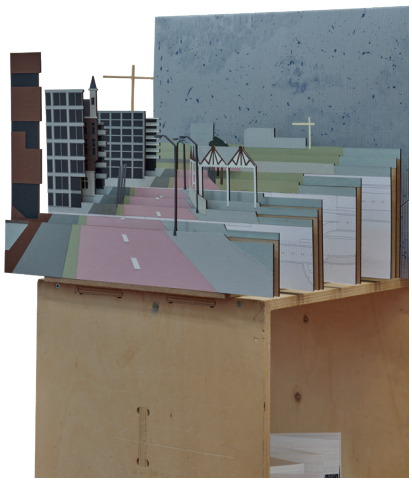
waiting hall

the project adopts the principle of a double facade



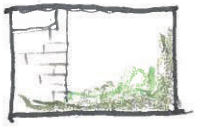
how would the routes and impressions along the way frame the moment of arrival?

what do you see?
what do you want to see?
how to trigger the imagination?



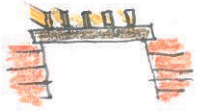
diorama, P1 exhibition piece © Max Hart Nibrig

to trigger imagination ← NIEUWSCHIERIGHEID 250218



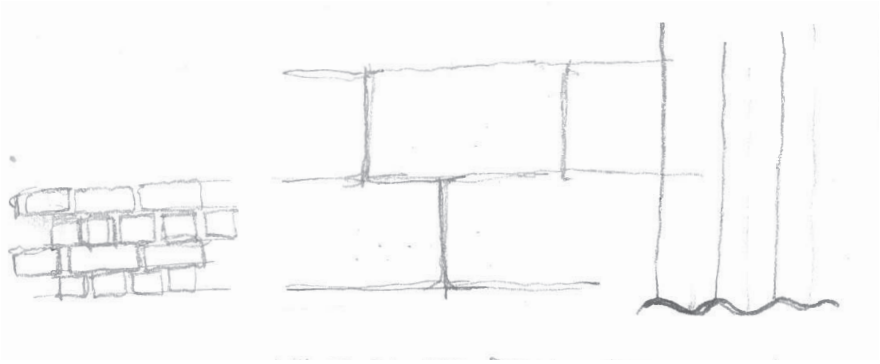
What's there, outside?

What was there? former opening

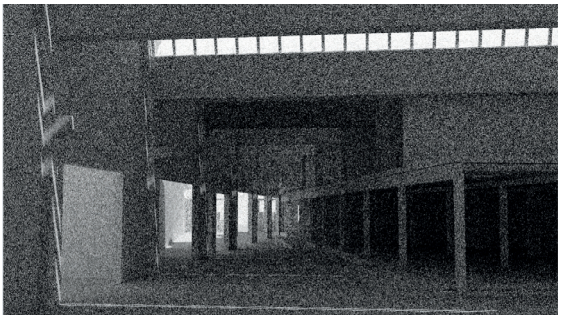


What could be there? seeing individual parts to build upon.

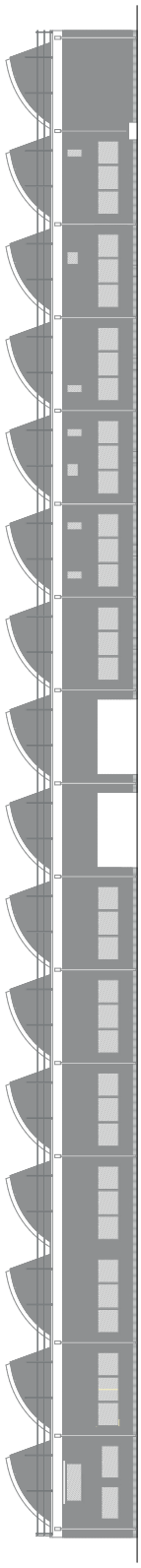
A few small windows in the second half of the facade are added; not to compete with the horizontal windows on the ground floor, but what are they here for? You will find the answer once you've been inside.

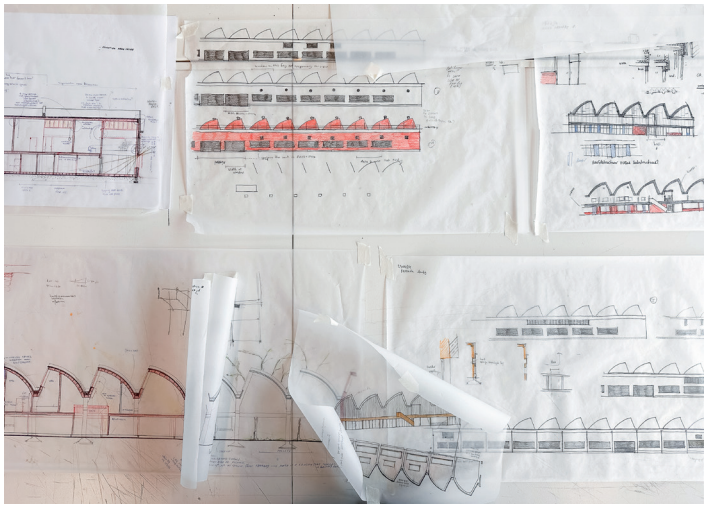


to touch the rough white painted bricks, the clay plaster on the hemplime blocks, or the corrugated sheets



to notice the light and wonder

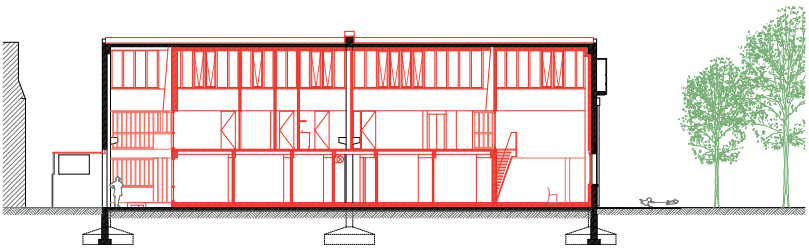


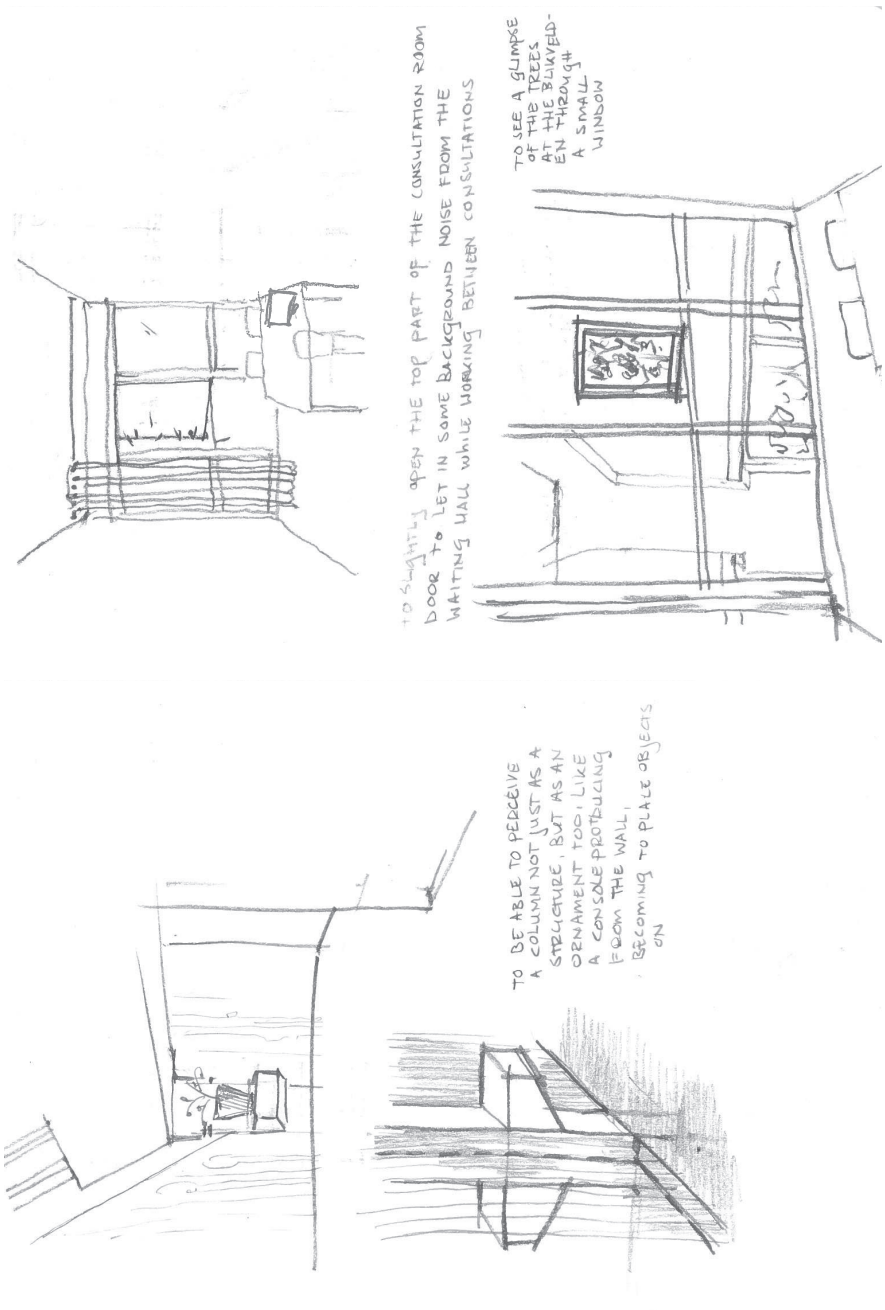


a study on openings in the facade

"Play is the swing off the rhythm in music, the bounce in the ball, the dance that delivers us from the lockstep march of life. It is the "meaningless" moment that makes the day memorable and worthwhile."

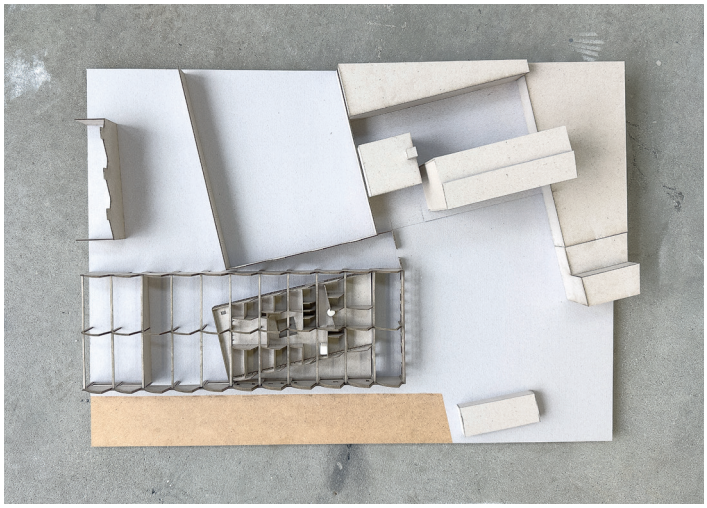
a door obliquely cut at House Unger © own image





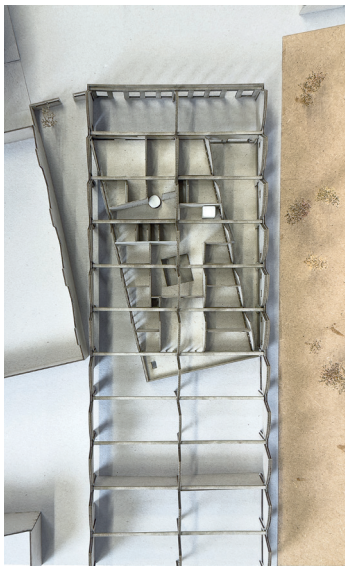
moments of joy in a neighbourhood healthcare centre

The entrance to the medical centre isn't located directly behind the first row of brickwork, but rather one bay further. This first bay will be kept raw. A threshold in which the user can contribute to the definition of the space.



1:200 model

portico



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