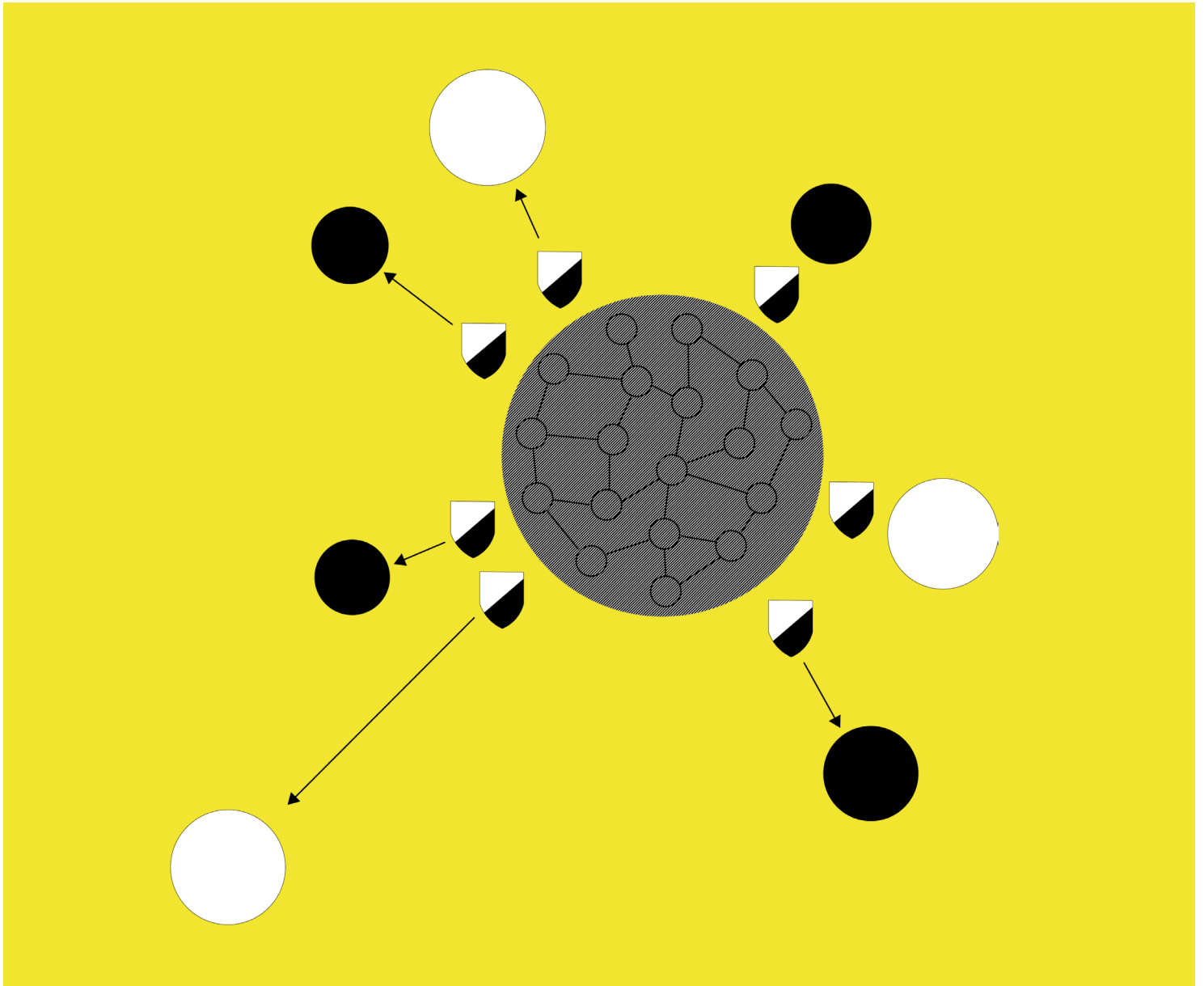


THE DEPOLARIZER



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The Depolarizer

*A public condenser in Bispebjerg,
Copenhagen: to fight the issue of polarization*

Project Summary

This project explores the role of architecture in mitigating polarization in our societies. The growing fragmentation of society into hostile groups that see each other as opponents on all major issues concerning the future, brings up concerns about the functioning of our societies. While solutions are often sought in politics, the social sciences, or social media design, in architecture the conversation has barely started. Yet, I believe our discipline has a crucial role to play. Beyond people, architecture co-shapes the foundation of society and, through its tangible presence, determines how we live for the next thirty-plus years. If we aim to build a society that is resilient to polarization, we must ensure that its foundation is designed to withstand it.

This project consists of both a prototype of what a "Depolarizer" could be (figure 1), and a design for a public building in Bispebjerg, Copenhagen, which is based on the principles of this prototype.

The Depolarizer prototype is built on the concept of shielding people off from polarizing factors, while at the same time strengthening social cohesion within the community. In architectural terms, this means creating space for debate in the "grey middle" through forums, reducing global and local polarizing influences (such as the distance between government and citizen, thus creating space for decentralized governance), celebrating diversity and difference through

exhibitions, and bringing people together through apolitical activities such as sports, food, makerspaces, and community gardens. Crucially, it must also ensure that these interactions are experienced positively by designing spaces that foster interaction and connection while minimizing potential disturbances caused by its openness. In spatial terms, this translates into a building that allows for transparency, expresses what happens inside, and offers flexibility and freedom for shared use and adaptation. The design is structured within a rigid grid, but emphasizes on organization and a human scale to facilitate the first encounters between people.

The public condenser in Bispebjerg is based on these principles but has been adapted to fit the specific characteristics of the location. The building aims to connect different separated groups of people and areas, at both the neighborhood as city scale. The building is easily accessible through its placement at the intersection of two important routes and opens up the area by redeveloping the border between the closed off NEXT vocational education school and the surrounding multicultural residential neighborhood (figure 2). The public condenser serves both groups by extending and opening up the school's existing apolitical program (crafting, making), to the neighborhood (figure 3). This new makerspace, allowing the two communities to meet and work together, combined with two forums, exhibition spaces, and the presence of government services, encourages dialogue, and mutual understanding.

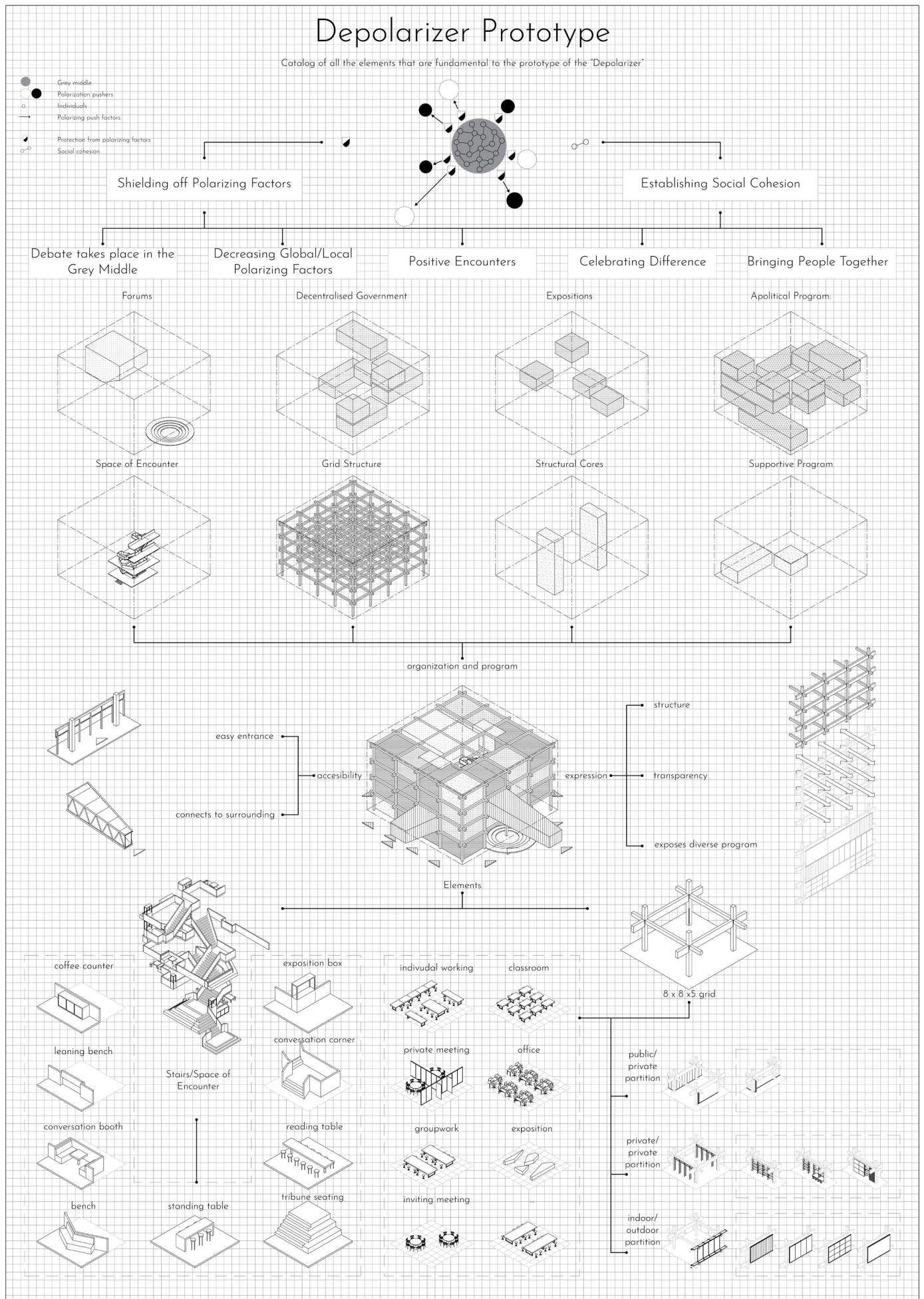


figure 1
depolarizer prototype

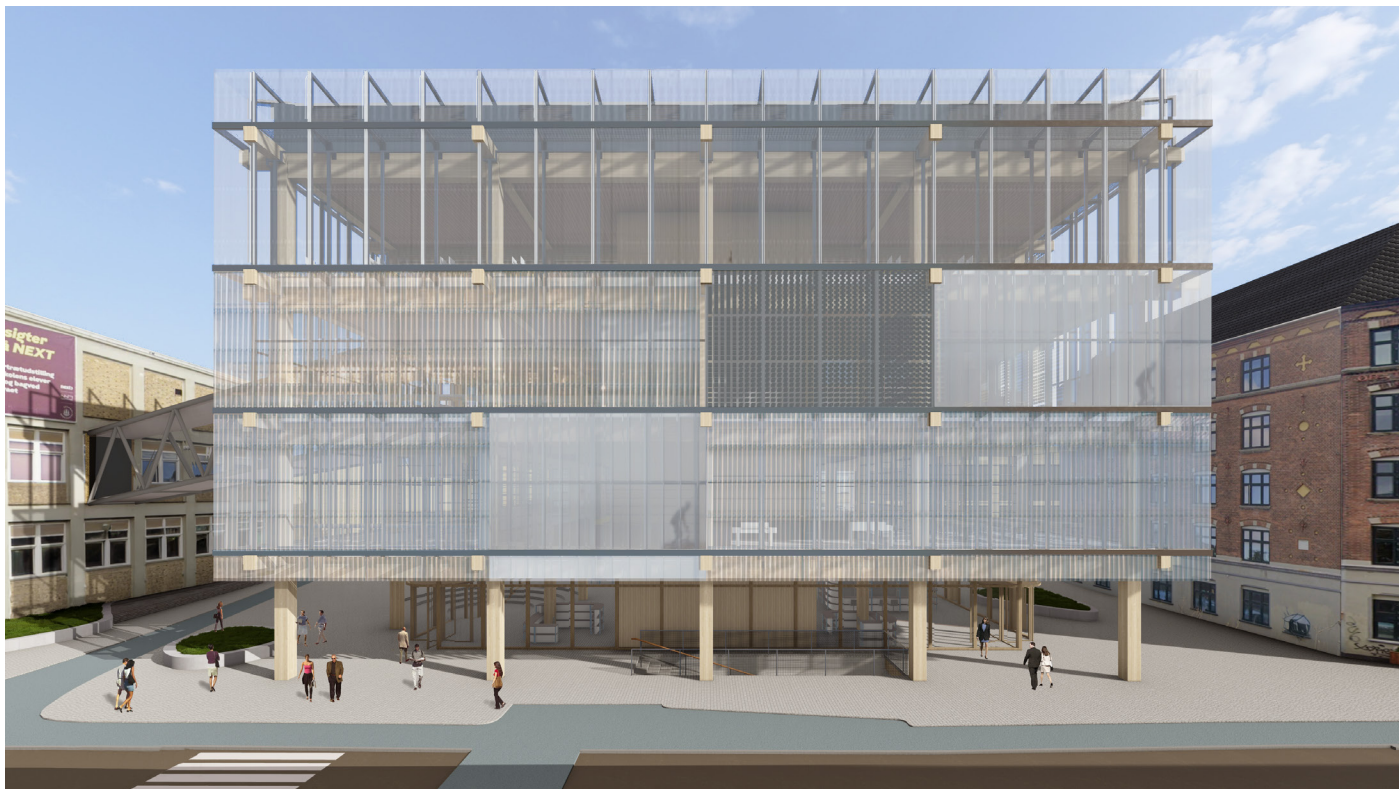


figure 2
Public Condenser in Bispebjerg: connecting people



figure 3
Public Condenser in Bispebjerg: connecting areas

Motivation

This project originated from a personal fascination. I have always been interested in politics and societal debate. After being involved in various political discussions and witnessing the large contrasts between opposing groups, thus also having to reflect on my own views, my interest shifted from specific topics to the underlying system behind them. On the one hand, I have found it frustrating that important issues could not be addressed anymore by a declining constructive debate. On the other hand, I was fascinated by how people who are fundamentally similar could become so hostile toward one another. This led me to explore how my own field of architecture could respond to this growing phenomenon of polarization.

Process and Methodology

Because my project includes both a prototypical component and a site-specific implementation, I conducted two parallel researches throughout the process, each continuously influencing the other. Both began with a broad preliminary research and were further developed through the research by design approach. See figure 4 for an overview of the schematic time distribution throughout the process.

Choosing a theme that was quite undiscovered in architecture and more commonly addressed in the social sciences meant that the first phase of my process focused on understanding the phenomenon and identifying potential architectural leads. This phase included mostly qualitative research: reviewing literature from multiple disciplines, analyzing case studies from architecture, industrial design, media design, and urbanism, and engaging in conversations with as many people as possible, including experts I encountered in the literature. Would I have had more time, I would have liked to expand this phase further, interview more experts to uncover more potential solutions.

The next phase was all about developing the prototype. The research brought numerous

ideas and approaches that suggested how such a building could function. However, to turn these into a coherent design and communicate it effectively, I needed to organize them under a few overarching concepts. A spatial diagram we had developed in one of the "Theory and Delineation" assignments proved helpful here. The diagram illustrated how polarization works and what roles exist within this phenomenon. By identifying points of intervention within this system, I was able to define what the building needed to do. This concept was, "shielding people off from polarizing factors," and "establishing social cohesion." (figure 5). All previously generated ideas could now be placed under these two themes.

At the same time, these individual concepts began to generate ideas for the architecture, for the program, the spatial organization, the form, circulation, construction, sequence of spaces, and overall user experience. This was the point at which the prototype began to turn into physical form and therefore could also be tested within the context of Bispebjerg. To do this effectively, a thorough site analysis was essential. This included not only an investigation into local polarizing factors but also a broader analysis of the site. This research was conducted in a group, with each subgroup focusing on specific themes in Bispebjerg and Copenhagen as a whole. It included analyses conducted both in the Netherlands and during a field trip to Copenhagen. From out this collective research, I was able to elaborate into topics that were especially relevant to my project. These included local issues such as gentrification, closed borders, social segregation, and the presence but inaccessibility of the NEXT Vocational Education School. Looking back, I would have liked to visit Copenhagen once again for a deeper insight into specific polarizing issues in the neighborhood. Interviews with local residents might have uncovered specific tensions that my building could have addressed.

After the P2 presentation, during which I presented all conceptual ideas, I felt that I missed understanding of the visitor experience in my building and I needed a tool to test

RESEARCH BY DESIGN

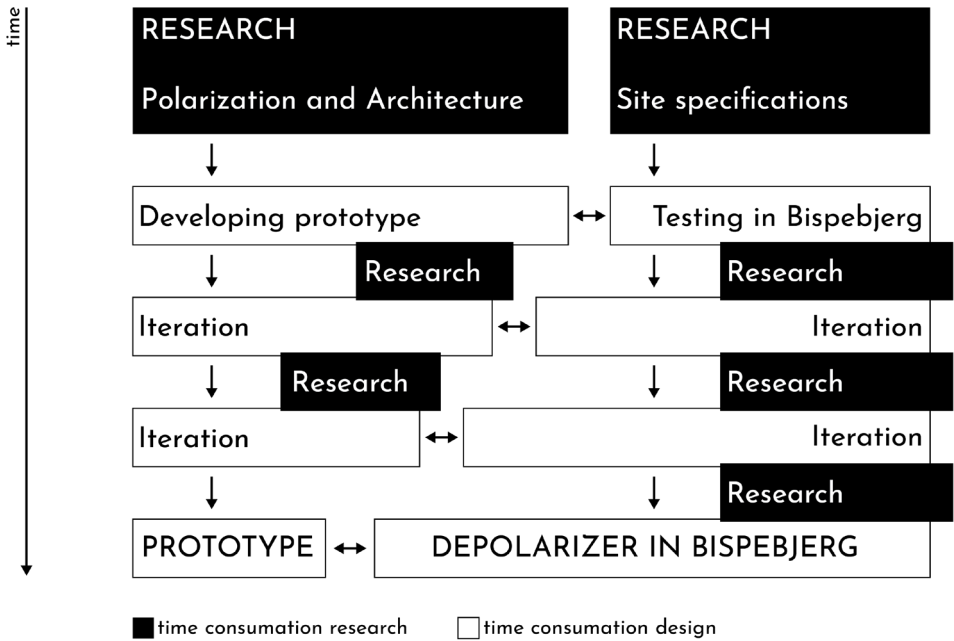


figure 4
research by design balance

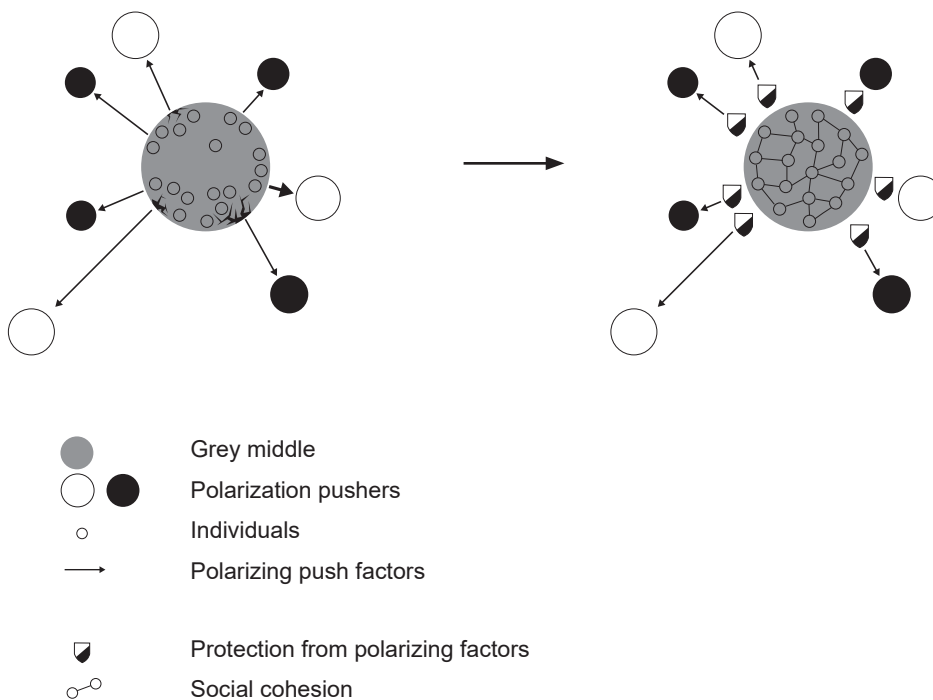


figure 5
depolarization concept

how the various architectural elements I was designing interacted. This led to the construction of a 1:50 scale model of a section of the project. This turned out quite helpful, and surprisingly it also helped me understand the structural concept of the building and the characteristics of the joints that enabled the structure to be demountable and expandable. The final phase of the process focused primarily on the technical exploration of building elements that would fulfill the promises made in the design concept. Particularly allowing transparency while maintaining comfort in a moderate climate like Copenhagen gave some challenges.

Relation to Program, Track, and Studio Topic

As a student from the Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences program, I see the overall task to design for societal needs, to come up with designs that benefit society or against issues that harm society. In the Architecture track, we focus on the scale of buildings and even down to the scale of human interaction, which means we have the ability to influence how people relate to one another. Specific for our studio topic "The Public Condenser" I see an opportunity to deal with a complex phenomenon that influences our societies; which is my graduation topic "Polarization". Designing a public building that combines multiple programs and serves a whole community, has a large reach to increase social cohesion and mitigate polarizing forces in a neighbourhood.

Academic and Societal Relevance

The academic and societal relevance of my graduation work mainly lies in starting up the conversation about how architecture can play a role in mitigating the growing phenomena of polarization and testing if architecture can actually play a role. By presenting a prototype for a depolarizer, I intend to offer a starting point, a reference for future designers to continue working on. This thesis questions the role of architecture in complex issues like polarization, does the public realm influence such phenomena?

Transferability of Results

By framing this graduation project around the central question of depolarization, I have partly achieved my goal. However, for a more successful outcome, this thesis must enable architects, designers, and critics to continue the conversation. It is therefore crucial to present a compelling and complete first design of a "Depolarizer". Then it could become a project that others can use, criticize, reflect on, and elaborate on. For clarity and to ensure the project's findings are transferable, it is important to distinguish clearly between elements of the general prototype and the site specific design for Bispebjerg. In the coming weeks, the story and visualization of the project into a simple to understand and convincing presentation will be the number one priority.

Conclusion

Throughout the project, polarization was the central theme. However, during the process, I came to realize that many of the individual concepts are already part of the architectural discourse, especially within the typology of the Public Condenser, which is all about bringing diverse programs and users together and creating interaction between them. This raises the valid question: isn't every Public Condenser a Depolarizer? Still, I believe the added weight of the label "Depolarizer" is important. It places greater focus on the issue and encourages people to reflect, regardless of their discipline, on also their own roles within this topic.

Final Reflection "Depolarizer"

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