

Depolarisation

In the city of The Hague

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Lastly I would like to thank all my past tutors and my (past) student colleagues. You have inspired me and made me a better architect, without you guys I would not have been where I am today.

I dedicate this thesis to my younger self, this graduation project is proof that you do not have to choose between your five million interests. You are allowed to be interested in multiple things and you will be able to combine multiple passions into one project.

I hope this report finds you well and that you find it both informative and inspiring.

Sincerely, Lauryn Selah van Leeuwen

ABSTRACT

This research investigates how public spaces can be designed and used to counteract political polarization in The Hague, with the aim to strengthen a better social connection between citizens. Political polarization is understood as the widening of ideological, emotional and perceived distance between groups becomes problematic when it undermines democratic cooperation, weakens social cohesion and enables “us vs them” dynamics. In The Hague these dynamics manifest spatially through contrasting voting patterns, symbolic street names tied to colonial histories and informal political expressions in neighbourhoods such as Transvaalkwartier. These observations highlight the need for spatial strategies that foster constructive encounters across social and political divides.

Incorporating GIS based electoral mapping and ethnographic observations this study analyses how polarisation manifests in everyday public spaces. Allport’s Contact Hypothesis, Oldenburg’s concept of third places and Soja’s Thirdspace are used to understand how public environments can support depolarizing interactions. These insights informed the development of a site specific design proposal in the Transvaalkwartier.

The results show that public space can counteract polarization when they enhance accessibility between neighbourhoods, provide inclusive and multifunctional environments and support informal equal status encounters. The proposed design transforms an industrial site into a connective public space featuring a new pedestrian passage, a conversation pit, communal gardens, children’s play areas and adaptive reuse of existing buildings into community serving functions such as a library, gym, restaurant, repair cafe and workshop spaces.

The study concludes that depolarizing public space requires a context sensitive approach that integrates spatial analysis, ethnographic insights and inclusive design strategies. The final design demonstrates how architectural interventions can strengthen social cohesion by creating environments that enable dialogue, shared activity and everyday encounters.

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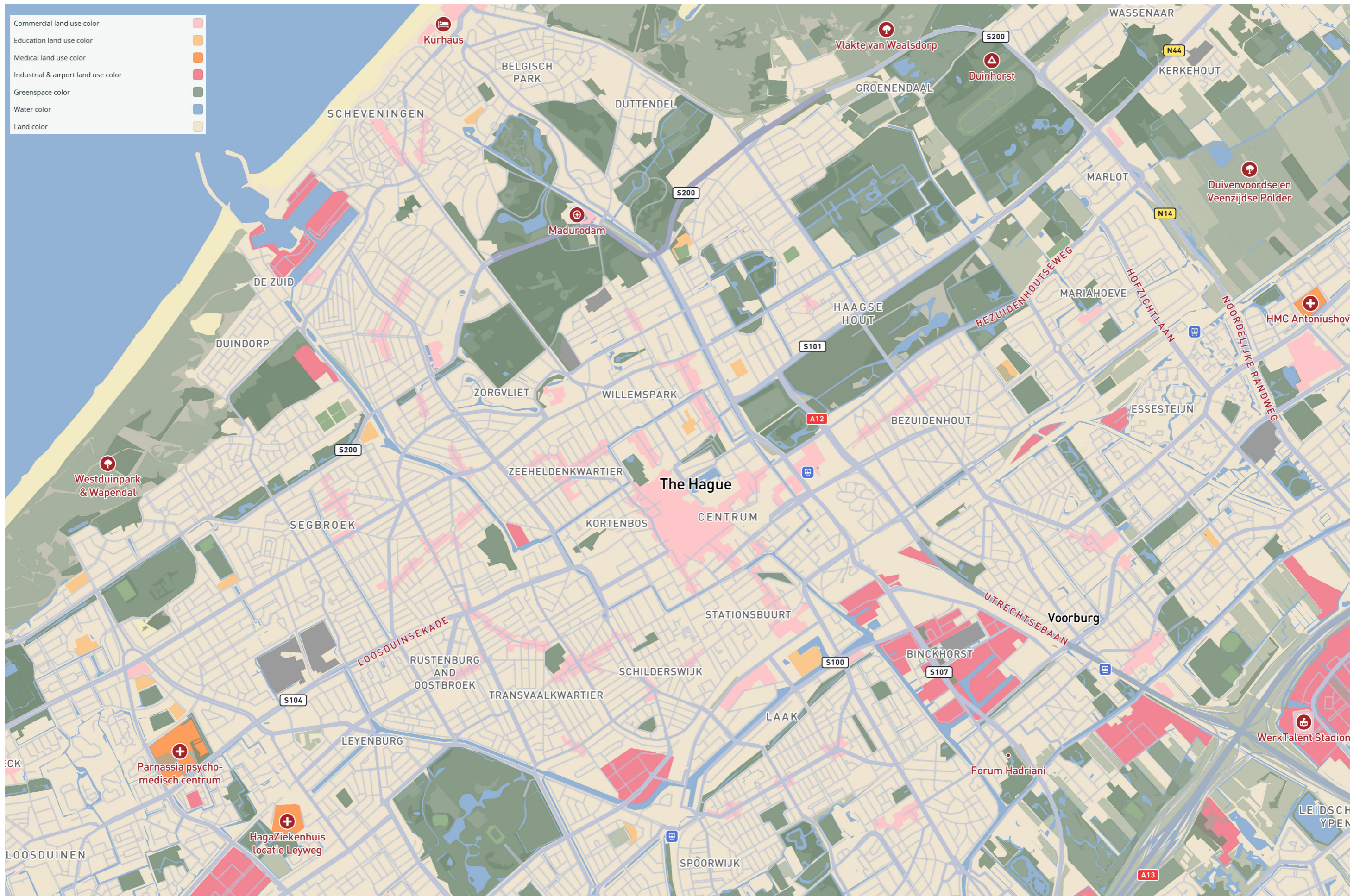


Figure 1: Map of the focus area The Hague

RESEARCH

Driekwart van de Nederlanders denkt dat polarisatie toeneemt

Nieuwsbericht | 29-12-2022 | 00:01

Ergernis over harde toon en extreme uitingen in politieke en publieke debat

Figure 2: News article (*Driekwart Van De Nederlanders Denkt Dat Polarisation Toeneemt*, 2022)

Geen verkiezing Woord van het Jaar, Van Dale kiest zelf 'polarisatie'

Uitgeverij Van Dale heeft de Woord van het Jaar-verkiezing dit jaar afgelast vanwege heftige reacties op sociale media. De uitgever kiest in plaats daarvan zelf voor het woord 'polarisatie'.

Figure 3: News article (*Geen Verkiezing Woord Van Het Jaar, Van Dale Kiest Zelf "polarisatie,"* 2024)

Buiten het Binnenhof: Peacewalk tegen polarisatie

Of het nou gaat om asiel, Gaza of klimaat: politieke partijen vliegen elkaar voortdurend in de haren. Veel Nederlanders maken zorgen over de polarisatie. Sommigen proberen er iets aan te doen. Zo was er in Amsterdam onlangs de Peacewalk.

Figure 4: News article (*Buiten Het Binnenhof: Peacewalk Tegen Polarisation*, 2025)

Zorgen onder kiezers over polarisatie: 'Niet nieuw, maar wel emotioneler'



Nina Jansen
redacteur Binnenland



Martin Drent
redacteur Binnenland

Uiteenlopende standpunten over Gaza, stikstof of asiel: mensen maken zich in aanloop naar de verkiezingen steeds meer zorgen over polarisatie. Desondanks neemt die polarisatie zelf niet toe, zeggen deskundigen tegen de NOS. Het fenomeen is alleen een stuk zichtbaarder geworden.

Figure 5: News article (*Zorgen Onder Kiezers Over Polarisation: "Niet Nieuw, Maar Wel Emotioneler,"* 2025)



Figure 6: News article (*Polarisation Bereikt Werkvloer, Maar Collega's Corrigeren Elkaar Ook Vaker*, 2025)

Niet sussen, maar juist een flinke schep erbovenop: het kabinet-Schoof kiest voor polarisatie

Openbaar bestuur Polarisation in de samenleving is niet nieuw, maar een kabinet dat eraan meedoet wel, zeggen wetenschappers. En dat heeft direct een negatief effect. „Politici onderschatten hun invloed.”

Figure 7: News article (*Niet Sussen, Maar Juist Een Flink Schep Erbovenop: Het kabinet-Schoof Kiest Voor Polarisation*, 2024)

‘De toverberg’ niet meer van deze tijd? Thomas Manns betoog tegen polarisation is juist actueler dan ooit

Figure 8: News article (*'De Toverberg' Niet Meer Van Deze Tijd? Thomas Manns Betoog Tegen Polarisation Is Juist Actueler Dan Ooit*, 2025)

INTRODUCTION

Fascination

The first elections I was interested in were the 2016 presidential elections of the United States of America. The big race between republican Donald Trump and democratic Hillary Clinton. Just a few months after those elections we had the national elections in The Netherlands. Unfortunately I was a few months too young to vote myself, but some of my friends were old enough to vote already so it was a big topic in our friend group during school breaks. Even most of our classes would have talks related to the elections. And these talks were my first real introduction to political polarization.

During these school talks I quickly realized that I was living in quite a different bubble than most of my classmates. And this divide only grew more and more when my interest towards social justice issues and inequality started to grow. While my classmates were out partying my friends and I were worrying about women's rights issues and attending protests.

In 2017 VVD became the biggest party during the elections, this was the first time I realized that my surroundings did not reflect the whole society, but rather a small portion of it. And since that first election I have come out deceived time and time again. Usually elections happen every four years, however since 2017 we have had 3 elections. In 2021, 2023 and just recently in 2025.

Just like in 2017 I have come to realize again that my left bubble is only a small part of Dutch society. And after these past elections I have come to realize I want to get out of my comfort bubble and go into the whole society and discover how our opinions can differ this much and how we could grow closer together.

The past two years I lived in The Hague, which is a city filled with a mixed population. There are worker families who have lived in The Hague for generation after generation, there are different ethnic groups, there are rich and poor people, young and old people, you can find it all in The Hague. However during my time in The Hague I noticed how these different groups seemed to be clustered together in different neighbourhoods. Even though The Hague is quite diverse, its neighbourhoods seem to be less diverse.

Which made me wonder if this was a personal choice by these groups of people or if this was an implementation from governmental levels. Having studied architecture for 6 years now, I am aware of the fact that usually within urban planning certain choices are made very purposefully. Therefore I started to question if these divisions in The Hague were accidental or were drawn on the planning table.

Within these neighbourhoods I also noticed that there are different public spaces in each area, which also means that these public spaces are used in different manners, but they also have things in common. Think of the Afdeling Den Haag stadium where people come together for entertainment but also for their football community, the Haagse Markt where people go to do their groceries but they also find their community there or a mosque where people go for worship and community. These are three very different spaces and their main purpose might be different, but they all have in common that a community can be found within these places. With this research I hope to find these commonalities in the public spaces in The Hague.

And thus I would like to combine my passion for both architecture and politics to research how the design of public spaces could be of influence to political depolarization, which could then contribute to better social cohesion within the urban context of The Hague.

Relevance

Polarization has been written about and researched a lot. As seen in figure 3 in 2024 it even became the word of the year in The Netherlands. This showcases that polarization is seen as a societal problem, which needs a solution. My interest lies in examining the connection between architectural design of public spaces and how the use of these public spaces could potentially influence political polarization and social cohesion within The Hague. This topic holds significant relevance for urban planning and architecture in an ever evolving society, especially within big cities in The Netherlands where inhabitant groups keep on changing and growing.

My ambition for this graduation project is to find out if and how architectural design of public spaces can be of influence to counteract political polarization within the urban context of The Hague, which can contribute to fostering social cohesion within the city. The goal is to create a design where different societal groups will get to meet each other and interact in such a way that they will get a better understanding of each other instead of fear for each other.

Due to the nature of the topic not being a typical topic within architecture this research will have an experimental approach. It is not pioneer work, however the research into the architectural influence on polarization is quite limited, therefore this thesis will be a new stepping stone into this topic to broaden the knowledge and understanding of the influence architecture can have on polarization or in particular depolarization.

While focused on The Hague, this research potentially offers insight applicable to other cities in The Netherlands facing similar challenges of polarization. In an era of migrating communities, global urbanization and heightened fears for the other it is important to understand the influence architecture can have on the use of public spaces, and how it can play an integral role in bringing people together or dividing them.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

People in the Netherlands are more and more polarized day by day. Politicians on both the right and the left are becoming more extreme and this creates a society that is getting more distanced from each other. Architecture can and is used for this phenomenon due to the demand for space in The Netherlands.

The general problem is the fact that architecture and politics are used as a tool to divide society by othering and creating a divide between groups. Resulting in people not talking to their neighbours anymore and the loss of communities in public spaces.

According to Teerds (2023) politics is always intertwined within the built environment, think of the division of space, the form of a space and how borders are created to keep people together or divide them. Research by Erdem et al. (2015) claims that social cohesion is crucial for the wellbeing in Dutch neighbourhoods. Think of frequent contact with neighbours, trust and being helpful towards each other. To ensure this contact happens architecture could be a tool to provide this possibility within public spaces.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Main question

How can public spaces be designed and used to counteract political polarization, in the context of The Hague to ensure a better social connection between citizens?

Sub research questions

What is political polarization and why is it a problem?

In what way can polarization be recognized in The Hague?

What is the role of a designer in creating designs that counteract political polarization?

What are the social and political consequences of the implementation of the design proposal, when implemented into reality?

LEXICON

Political polarization

For this research, the conceptualization of political polarization is based on “Politieke polarisatie in Nederland”. Within this study, political polarization is understood primarily as a phenomenon occurring within Dutch society as a whole (mass polarization), rather than as polarization among politicians or within governmental institutions (elite polarization). Furthermore, politics is defined broadly, it does not only include actors and issues within formal political structures, but also societal debates, values, and collective identities. Political polarization is thus understood not only as a process in which divisions between social groups intensify (polarization), but also as a condition in which contrasts between groups become increasingly bigger (being polarized). (Dekker, 2022) This distinction enables the research to address both the dynamics and the manifestations of polarization within society.

SCOPE

This research will focus on the city of The Hague and in particular it will look into the public spaces within The Hague. The aim of the research is to find out what the architectural influence could be on the design of public spaces to counteract political polarization, to ensure a better social cohesion within The Hague. For polarization the main focus is political polarization, so polarization based on other topics will be left out. The research will try to come up with architectural solutions, these solutions might not be the most obvious ones, however these might make them even more relevant because they could potentially lead to insights for other cities.

RESEARCH DIAGRAM

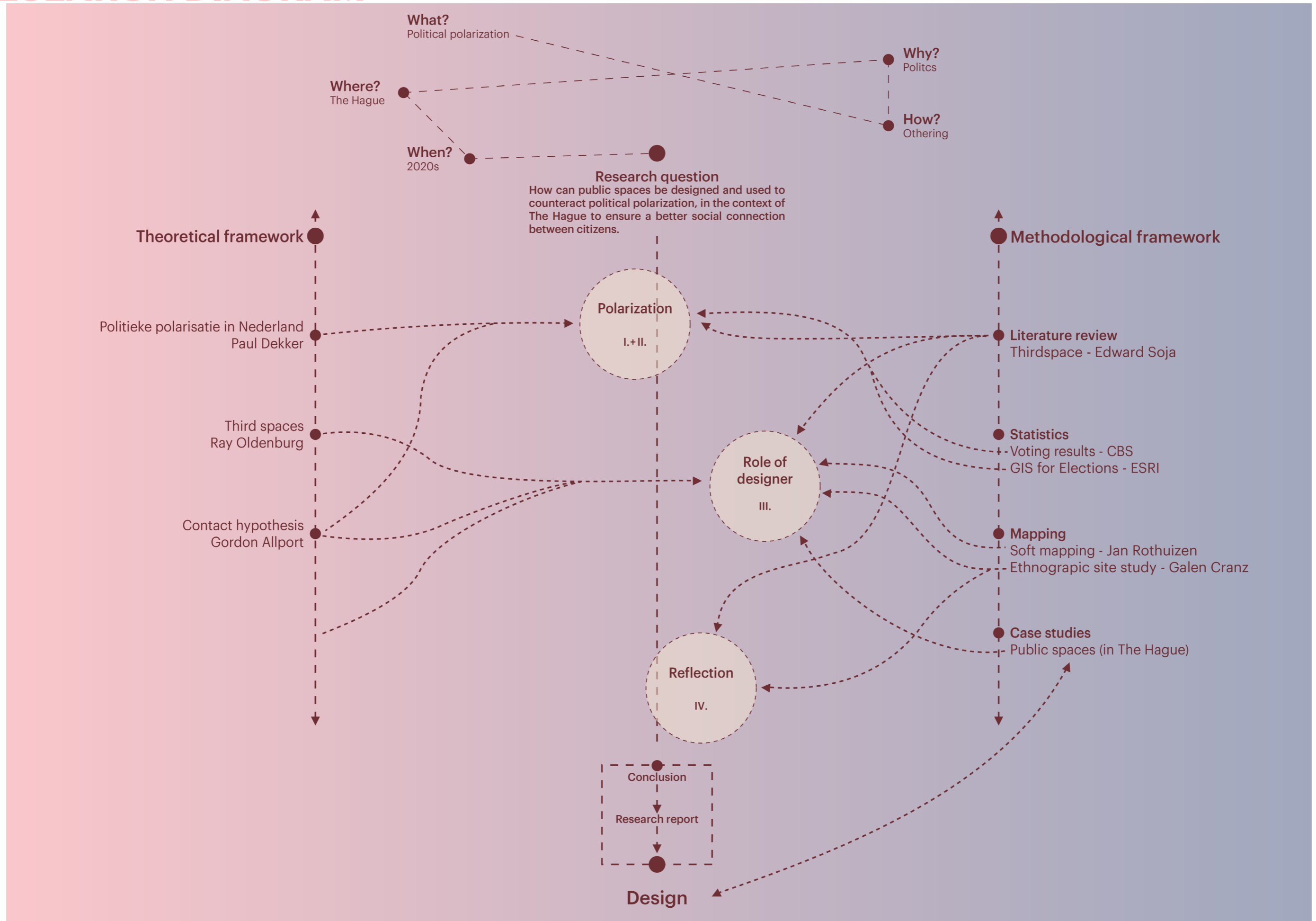


Figure 9: Diagram to explain the research, created by author

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research investigates how the design and use of public spaces may influence processes of depolarization, to ensure a better social cohesion within The Hague. The study begins with a review of diverse sources addressing polarization in the Netherlands, including academic literature and renowned news outlets. This literature review aims to establish a foundational understanding of polarization within the Dutch context. Based on this theoretical grounding, the research explores the various ways in which architectural design may influence processes of polarization and depolarization.

One of the sources is the Book “Politieke polarisatie in Nederland” edited by Paul Dekker. The book is the last funded project by a foundation dedicated to identifying social divisions and exploring strategies to address them, with Paul Dekker, who used to work for this foundation, as the editor. (Dekker, 2022) The book is an exploration on the nature and development of political polarization within Dutch society. The book brings together contributions from multiple scholars to examine how polarization manifests across public opinion, political attitudes, media environments, and social behaviour. Distinguishing between different forms of polarization such as issue polarization, ideological polarization, group polarization, and affective polarization. The book offers the research a better understanding of political polarization in The Netherlands, which is essential for contextualizing the spatial and social analysis of The Hague.

Gordon W. Allport’s Contact Hypothesis provides an important theoretical lens for understanding how everyday interactions can influence political polarization. Allport was an American psychologist and one of the founding figures in personality and social psychology. (Britannica Editors, n.d.) His theory suggests that meaningful contact between members of different social groups can reduce prejudice, challenge stereotypes, and foster more positive intergroup attitudes, provided that certain conditions are met. These conditions, such as equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and supportive social norms, are particularly relevant in the context of public spaces, which have the potential to bring diverse groups into regular contact.

Although contact alone does not automatically lead to depolarization, the Contact Hypothesis highlights the potential of well-designed public environments to support the conditions under which interaction can occur. (McLeod, 2023)

The importance of these public spaces is explained by Ray Oldenburg, an American urban sociologist best known for coining the term “third place”. (Project for public spaces, n.d.) Oldenburg argued that informal public gathering places are vital to community life and democratic culture because they provide neutral, inclusive settings for social interaction outside the home and workplace. (Oldenburg, 2023) When considered in relation to Allport’s Contact Hypothesis, third places are significant because they create environments where intergroup contact can occur under conditions helpful in reducing prejudice and social distance. Both theories suggest that regular, voluntary, and informal interactions in equal settings help to challenge stereotypes, build understanding, and foster positive social relations. In public spaces that function as third places, such as cafes, parks, or libraries, people from diverse backgrounds may meet one another, talk, and develop shared experiences, thereby potentially mitigating political polarization and strengthening community cohesion.

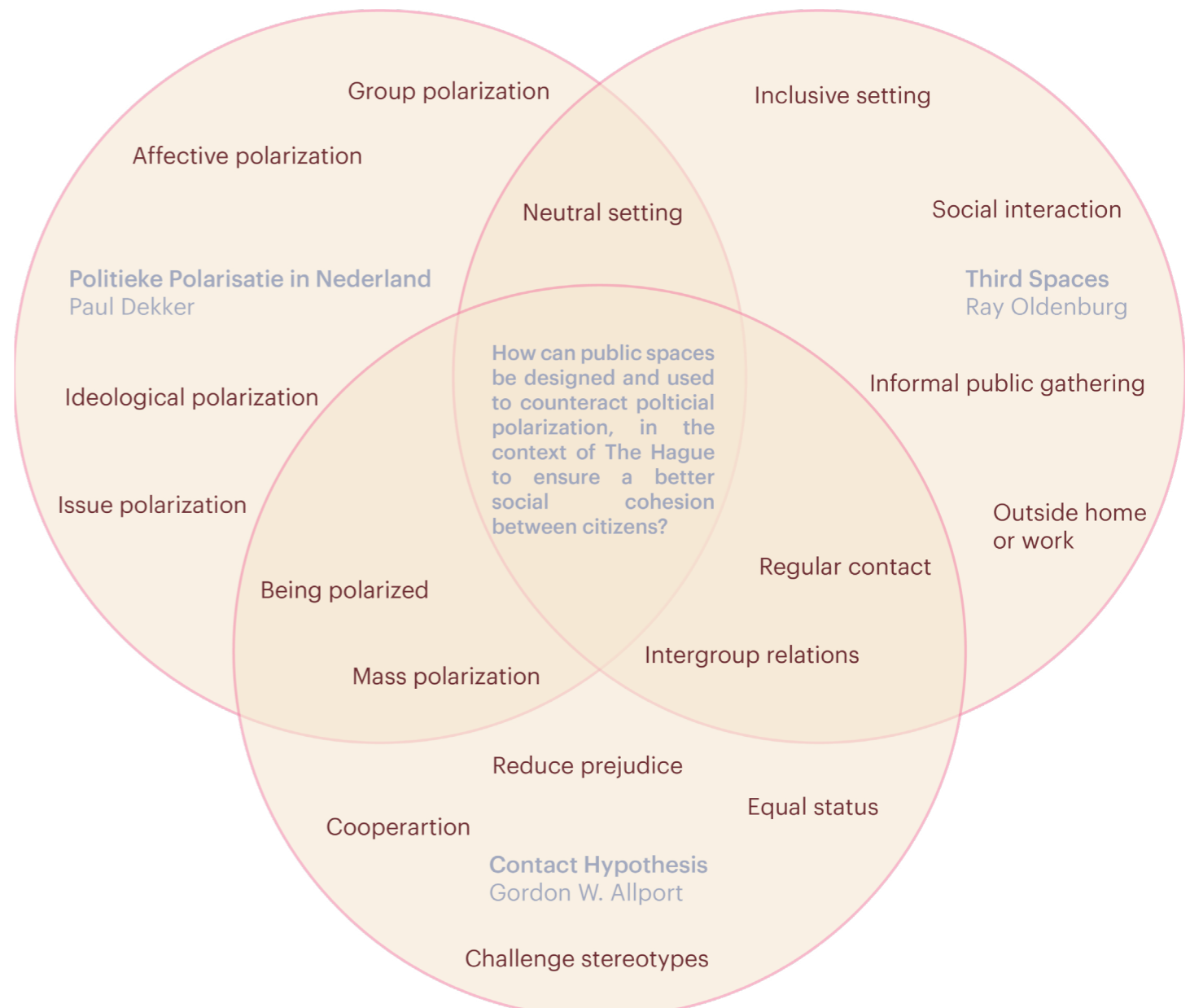


Figure 10: Diagram to explain theoretical framework, created by author

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Edward Soja's Thirdspace argues that space should be understood not only as a physical environment but also as a lived and imagined social construct shaped by power, identity, and everyday experience. His concept provides a strong theoretical foundation by framing public space as an interplay between physical space (Firstspace), conceptual or imagined space (Secondspace), and lived, embodied experience (Thirdspace). Soft mapping and ethnographic observation align with this trialectical view: they document not only material characteristics but also how people perceive, interpret, and inhabit space. These methods reveal the hybrid and sometimes contradictory realities of urban environments, where spatial form, social practices, and symbolic meanings continuously shape one another.

Integrating Thirdspace with both qualitative and quantitative methods strengthens the analysis by connecting multiple spatial layers. GIS mapping of electoral data offers insight into the Firstspace dimension, showing spatial patterns of political preference and segregation across The Hague. Ethnographic observation and soft mapping illuminate the Secondspace and Thirdspace dimensions, revealing how residents experience public spaces, what social boundaries they perceive, and how interactions unfold. Bringing these layers together creates a more nuanced understanding of how political polarization is not only social or ideological but also spatially produced and reproduced. In line with Soja's theory, this mixed methods approach highlights how design features, everyday uses, and symbolic meanings intersect and how public spaces can either facilitate encounters between different groups or reinforce separation. Thirdspace therefore provides a theoretical lens that deepens the methodological framework of this research.

Case study analysis will be conducted to develop an understanding of selected public spaces in The Hague, focusing on how these spaces are designed, used, and for whom they are intended. One of the primary methods is soft mapping, informed by the approach of Jan Rothuizen. This method involves walking through and around selected public spaces while producing maps that combine drawn and written annotations. These maps document not only what is seen but also sensory impressions such as sound, smell, atmosphere, and personal interactions. (ARCH+ Issue 238: Architectural Ethnography, 2020)

To complement this mapping, principles from Galen Cranz's Ethnography for Designers (2016) will be applied, emphasizing prolonged observation, everyday practices, and the social meanings embedded in public space. Cranz, a professor of architecture and trained sociologist, teaches social and cultural approaches to architecture and urban design. (Routledge, n.d.)

Combining soft mapping with ethnographic observation enables a qualitative, situated analysis of public spaces, capturing both spatial configurations and lived experiences. This approach offers insight into how public spaces in The Hague may foster social interaction or contribute to social separation.

In addition to qualitative mapping, electoral data from the most recent Tweede Kamer elections (2025) will be incorporated to provide a quantitative perspective on political polarization. GIS analysis of neighbourhood level voting patterns can identify concentrations of political affiliation, areas of heightened polarization, and potential socio-political divides. Based on these spatial patterns, a focus area will be selected in which political polarization is most clearly expressed.

The focus area can then be examined through soft mapping to observe how public spaces are used, what types of interactions occur, and whether design features facilitate or constrain encounters between different groups. Integrating spatially precise electoral data with observational mapping offers a comprehensive understanding of how public space design influences political polarization, social interaction, and social cohesion.

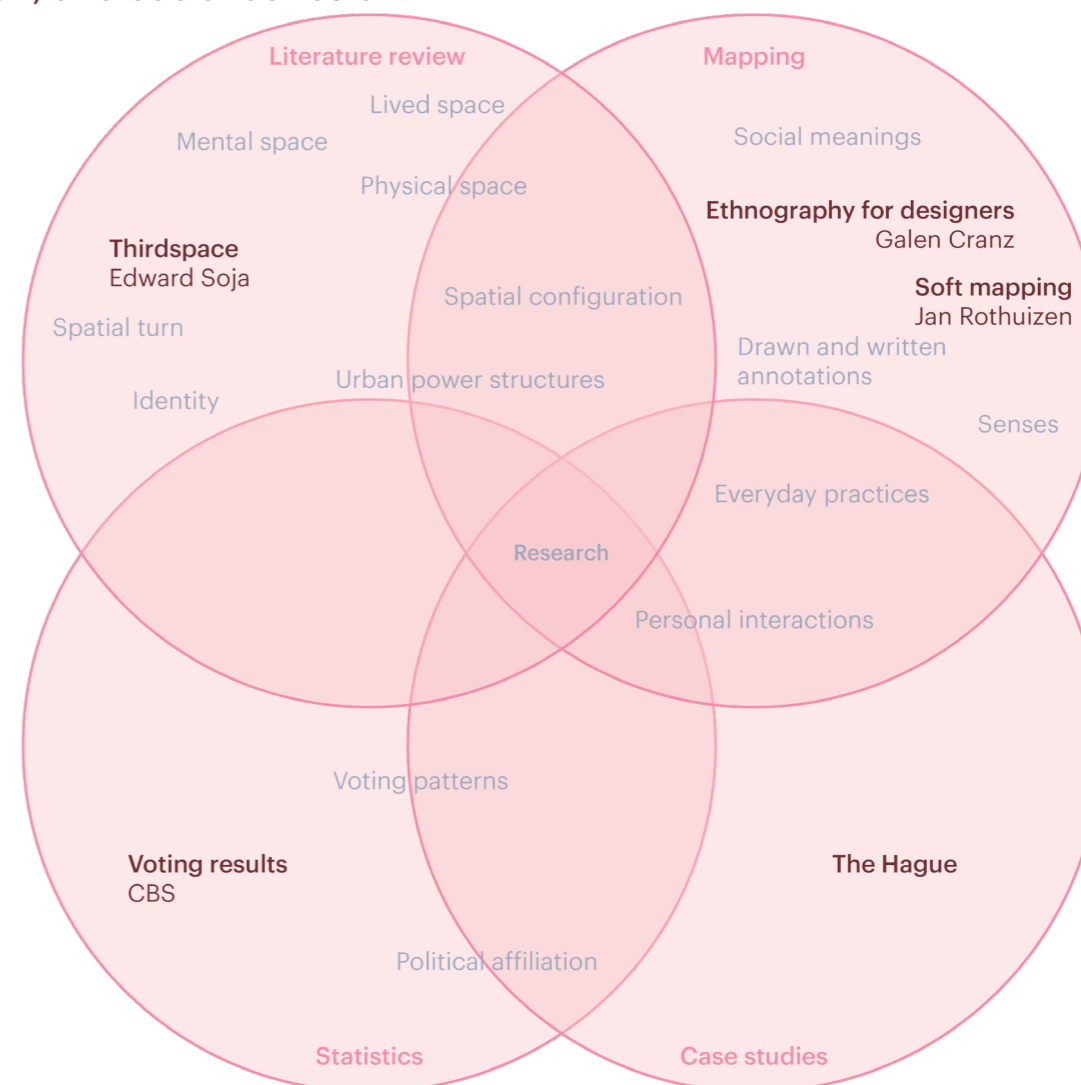


Figure 11: Diagram to explain methodological framework, created by author

LITERATURE RESEARCH

RESEARCH

WHAT IS POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND WHY IS IT A PROBLEM?

Political polarization is the process in which political opinions, identities and attitudes increasingly move towards opposite extremes and moving away from more moderate and shared viewpoints. (Churcher, 2023) In the Dutch context, Dekker and the co-authors (2022, p. 13) describe polarization as “the growing apart of groups in society, both in attitudes and in behaviour”. This definition explains that polarization is not only about ideological distance but also about social and emotional separation between groups.

Political polarization can be seen in two ways there is the polarization within society ‘Mass polarization’ and then there is polarization within the political systems ‘Elite polarization’ (Dekker, 2022, p. 13), for this thesis the focus will be put on the mass polarization, due to the nature of the research that will be done within a neighbourhood in The Hague.

There are 5 forms of political polarization that can be distinguished.

1. Issue polarization: opinions become more opposing. This could mean more extreme opinions, but it could also mean more unwavering opinions.
2. Ideological polarization: individual opinions become increasingly interconnected and start forming ideological packages. This process of alignment could cause a divide between opposing ideological packages.
3. Societal embeddedness: political differences could begin to overlap with existing social, economic and cultural divides, which could lead to homogenous groups clustering together.
4. Affective polarization: the feeling of being divided starts to grow, people will have more positive feelings towards people with the same opinions and start to grow more resentment towards the people with different opinions.
5. Perceptual polarization: instead of a divide within morals and preferences the divide starts to happen within a perceived truth.

(Dekker, 2022, p. 14-15)

Political polarization is not inherently bad or a problem. It could be very beneficial actually, moderate people could become interested in politics for example. It could also help voters in deciding which party best suits them. The voters don’t have to be polarized, however without a clear preference it could be harder to get them engaged within politics. (Dekker, 2022, p. 16) Nevertheless the negative effects of polarization are worrisome, due to the growing lack of willingness to make compromises, people wanting to prove their own points, the growing phenomenon of othering, hostility between different groups, people removing themselves from public debates and people radicalizing which could lead to violence. (Dekker, 2022, p. 17)

Political polarization is the widening of ideological and emotional distance between groups. As described by Dekker’s ‘Politieke polarisatie in Nederland’, it manifests in hardened attitudes, reduced willingness to cooperate, and stronger “us versus them” dynamics. It becomes a societal problem when it undermines democratic functioning, weakens social cohesion and, erodes trust in institutions and increases sensitivity to misinformation. While disagreements are an essential part of democracy, extreme polarization could lead to the threatening of a shared foundation that allows democratic societies to function. (Dekker, 2022)

CONTEXTUAL RESEARCH

RESEARCH

IN WHAT WAY CAN POLITICAL POLARIZATION BE RECOGNIZED IN THE HAGUE?

As shown in figures 12-14, voting patterns during the national elections vary considerably across neighbourhoods. Notably, several areas exhibit a contrast between the largest and second largest parties, such as neighbourhoods where DENK and the PVV dominate the vote in opposing positions. (Uitslagen Tweede Kamerverkiezing 2025, n.d) For the purposes of this research, a focus area will be selected in which these contrasting voting patterns are visible. The neighbourhood of Transvaalkwartier has been chosen for further investigation due to the noticeable electoral divergence both within the neighbourhood itself and in its surrounding areas. (figure 15) This selection enables an in depth examination of how such political divergence is reflected in the design, use, and social dynamics of public space.

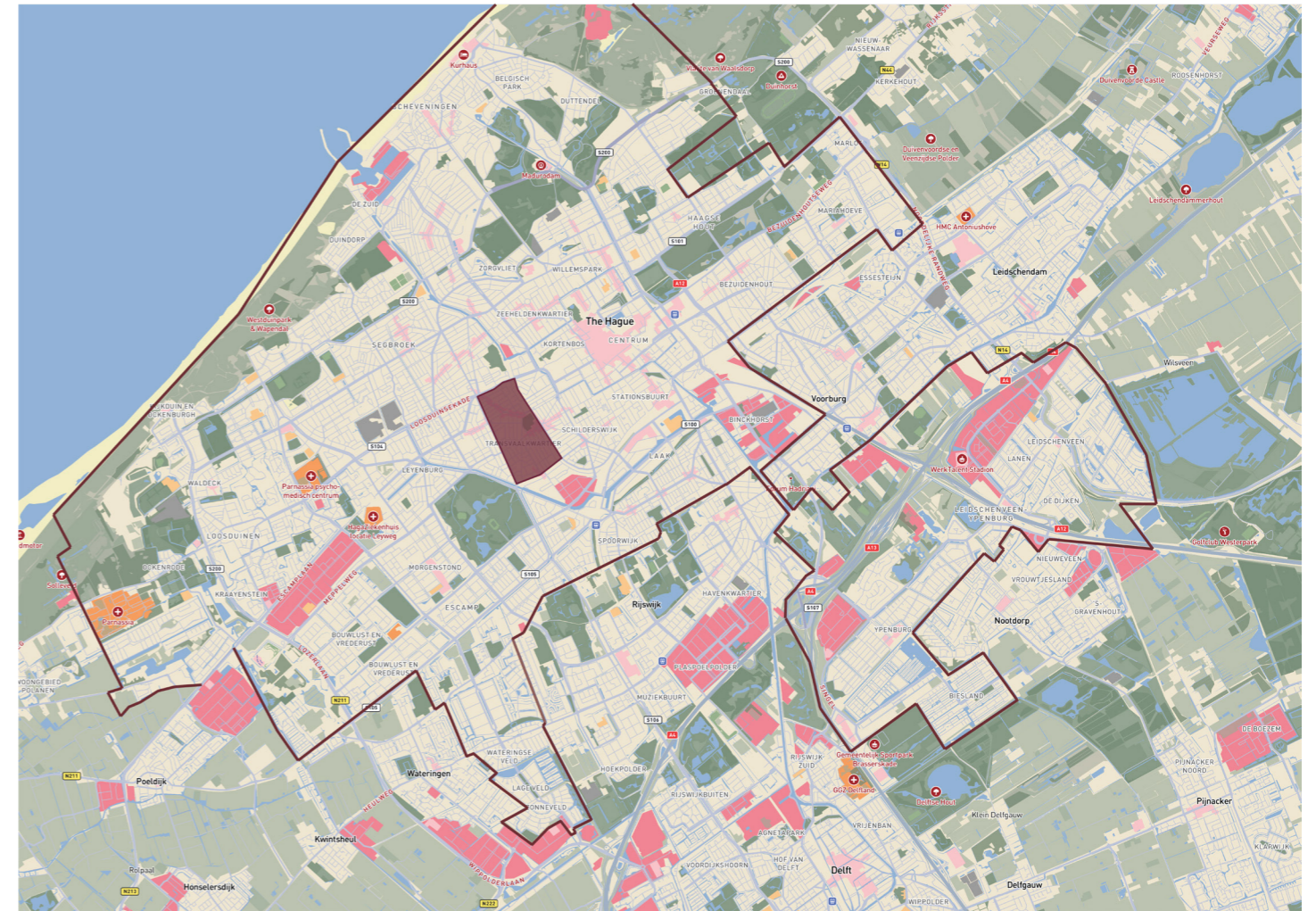


Figure 15: showing the focus are Transvaalkwartier, created by author

- D66
- Groenlinks - PVDA
- PVV
- Denk
- VVD
- No voting booths

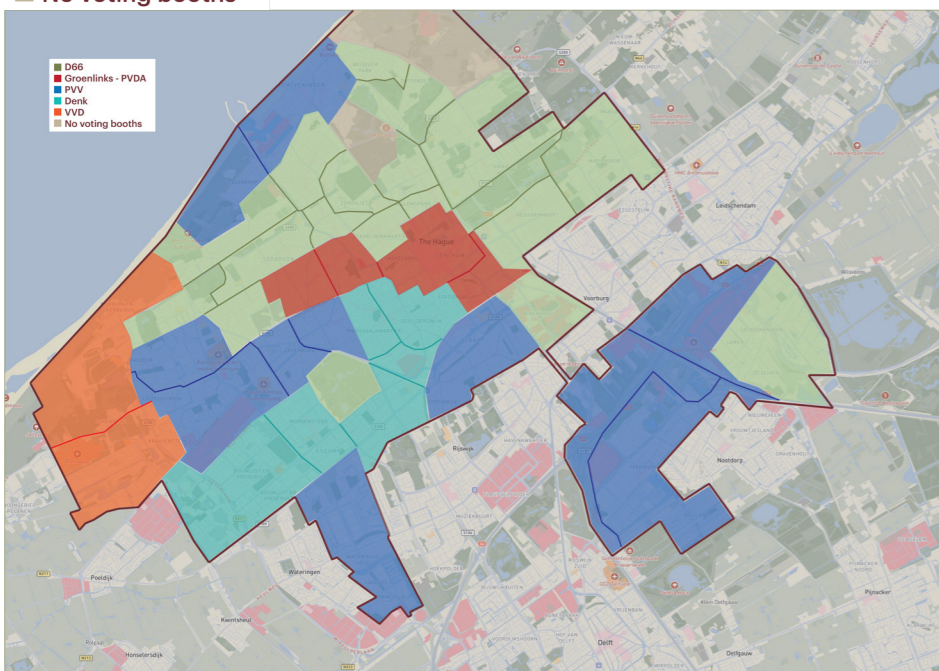


Figure 12: the largest party per neighbourhood, created by author

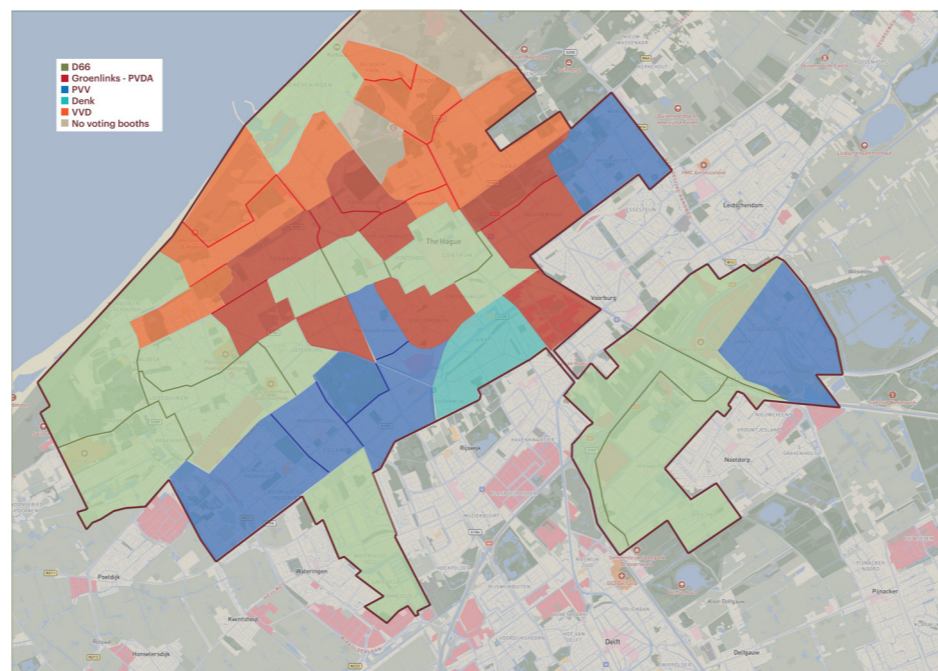


Figure 13: the second largest party per neighbourhood, created by author

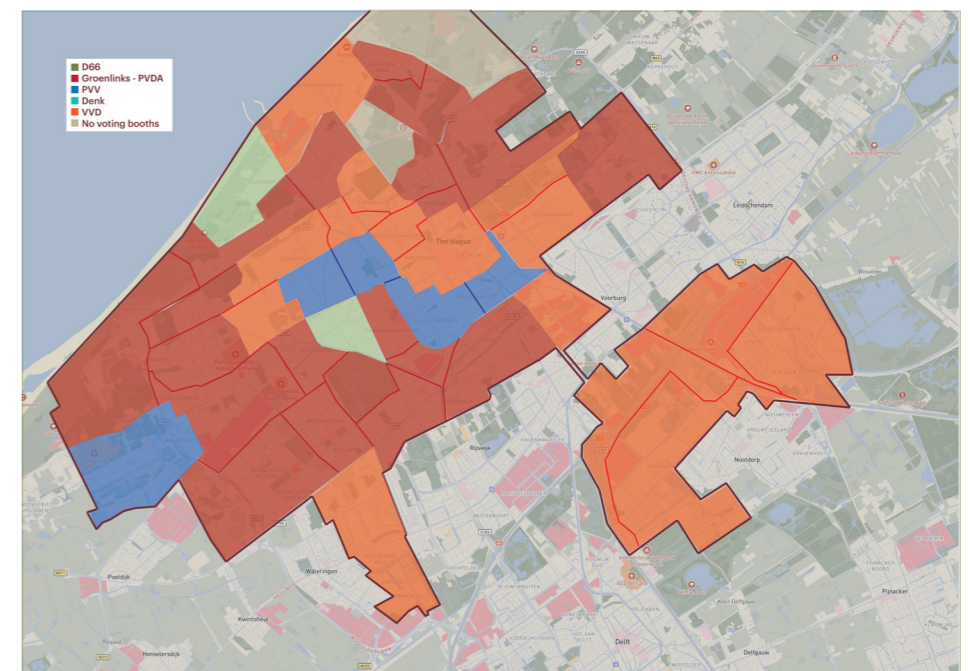


Figure 14: the third largest party per neighbourhood, created by author

IN WHAT WAY CAN POLITICAL POLARIZATION BE RECOGNIZED IN THE HAGUE?

The Transvaalkwartier contains two major commercial areas that attract different user groups. (figure 16) One of these is the Haagse Markt, which draws visitors from both within and beyond the city, while the Paul Krugerplein primarily serves local residents. The neighbourhood's name itself, Transvaalkwartier, derives from the former Transvaal region in South Africa, historically associated with the Boer (farmer) republics and later with colonial and apartheid governance. The name "Paul Kruger," a prominent Boer leader and president of the South African Republic, further introduces a polarizing element into the public space. (South African History Online, 2025) Reflecting these historical ties, the streets surrounding Paul Krugerplein are named after figures connected to South African colonial history. (figure 17) Within this context, the continued commemoration of such individuals through street names can be raising questions about the symbolic meanings embedded in the neighbourhood's urban landscape and the ways in which colonial memory persists in contemporary public space.

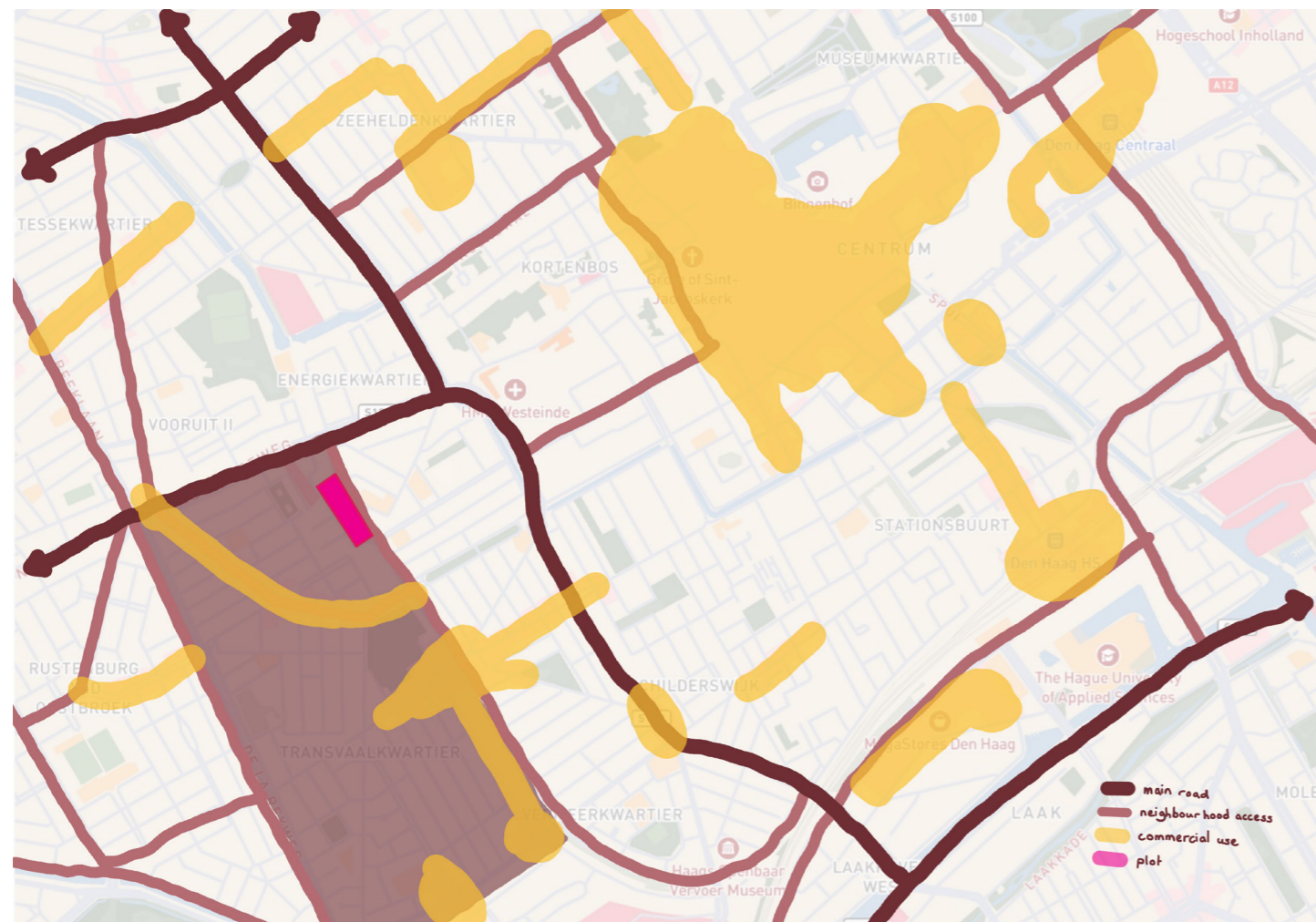


Figure 16: Map portraying the commercial areas and road access, created by author



Figure 17: street names around Paul Krugerplein, taken by author

IN WHAT WAY CAN POLITICAL POLARIZATION BE RECOGNIZED IN THE HAGUE?

One of the site visits took place in the weeks leading up to the municipal elections, during which political posters were prominently displayed throughout the commercial areas. These posters (figure 18) highlighted not only the diversity of political parties but also the range of individual candidates, making the political landscape particularly visible in the public realm.

In addition to the electoral posters, another intervention in the public space sought to draw attention to the municipal elections. This consisted of chairs designed by students from De Haagse Hogeschool in collaboration with local residents, 8 chairs were designed for each district in the city. The chairs were intended to promote the elections and encourage greater voter participation. (Verkiezingszetels, n.d.) Importantly, the installation also functioned as a depolarizing element within the public space, because it incorporated multiple languages in the design. (figure 19) Which made the chair accessible and inclusive to the diverse ethnic communities living in the neighbourhood.



Figure 18: electoral poster for the municipal elections, taken by author



Figure 19: The electoral chair for district "Centrum", placed in Transvaalkwartier, taken by author

IN WHAT WAY CAN POLITICAL POLARIZATION BE RECOGNIZED IN THE HAGUE?

Public expressions of political sentiment in the neighbourhood extended beyond formal interventions such as the election posters and the chair. Numerous stickers and posters could be found throughout the neighbourhood on lampposts and in window frames. (figure 20) It demonstrates how the residents actively appropriate elements of the public realm to communicate their political positions. A dominant theme amongst these informal expressions was the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Although this issue receives attention within Dutch political debate, the prevalence of these messages suggests that some residents perceive governmental action as insufficient. These visual interventions therefore function as both political commentary and a means of asserting presence within shared urban space. Which could indicate that the residents are longing for a place where these opinions could be expressed and heard.



The Transvaalkwartier illustrates how political polarization becomes visible and tangible within public space. Contrasting voting patterns, layered histories, and symbolic street names all contribute to the a neighbourhood where social and political meanings intersect. The presence of election posters and the community designed chair further shows how political engagement is wanted. Informal expressions, like the posters and stickers, demonstrate how residents also appropriate public space to articulate political concerns that extend beyond the local scale. Together these elements reveal a neighbourhood shaped by both division and attempts at inclusivity. Studying this area therefore offers a valuable insight into how political polarization is reflected, negotiated and occasionally softened through the design, use and symbolism of shared public spaces.

Figure 20: stickers and posters in Transvaalkwartier, taken by author

RESEARCH

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF A DESIGNER IN CREATING DESIGNS THAT COUNTERACT POLITICAL POLARIZATION?

In a polarizing society the designer plays a crucial role in shaping the spatial conditions through which social relations, political identities and everyday encounters unfold. Political polarization in the Netherlands is not only a social or political phenomenon, but also a spatial one. As shown in neighbourhoods such as the Transvaalkwartier, polarization becomes visible in the built environment through contrasting voting patterns, symbolic street names and informal political expressions. These spatial manifestations demonstrate that public space is a site where competing narratives, complaints and identities are negotiated.

Within this context designers shape the environments in which intergroup contact occurs. Allport's Contact Hypothesis provides a valuable lens for understanding this role. Meaningful encounters between different social groups can reduce prejudice when conditions such as equal status, shared goals cooperation and/or supportive norms are present. (McLeod, 2023) Public spaces could support these conditions. Oldenburg (2023) argues that informal, accessible gathering places foster democratic culture by enabling voluntary, unstructured interaction among diverse users. Designers therefore influence whether public spaces reinforce separation or create opportunities for contact.

The role of the designer can also be seen within ethnographical research. When looking at Edward Soja's book 'Thirdspace' (1996), public space must be understood as something simultaneously physical, conceptual and lived in. Ethnographical observational analysis (Cranz, 2016) reveals how residents inhabit, perceive and challenge the space. These insights highlight that design interventions cannot solely rely on formal aesthetics. The designed must respond to lived experiences, symbolic meanings and the subtle social boundaries that shape everyday interactions. Designers must therefore read public spaces critically, acknowledging how spatial arrangements can either create political divides or open possibilities for shared spaces.

In a polarizing society the designer's responsibility goes two ways. On the one hand the designer must identify how spatial, historical and symbolic elements contribute to exclusion and tension. On the other hand they must create environments that support inclusive, equitable and meaningful encounters. They should create spaces where diverse groups can coexist and communicate. Sometimes this inclusion could also look like creating some sort of exclusion where people could retract themselves.

Designs could function as a depolarizing tool by making public spaces more accessible and representative of its users. Thus the designer does not only become a shaper of physical form but also a facilitator of social cohesion. Through careful attention to spatial justice, everyday practices and the conditions that enable positive intergroup contact, designers can contribute to counteracting political polarization.

WHAT ARE THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DESIGN PROPOSAL, WHEN IMPLEMENTED INTO REALITY?

The implementation of this design proposal would generate significant social and political effects within the Transvaalkwartier and its surrounding districts. The removal of one industrial building to create a new passage between the Transvaalkwartier and the Schilderbuurt will alter existing spatial relationships. By establishing a direct pedestrian and cycling connection the intervention increases accessibility between two politically distinct neighbourhoods, potentially fostering more frequent everyday encounters. These movements align with the principles of the Contact Hypothesis theory, which suggests that regular informal interaction can reduce social distance (McLeod, 2023) and could lead to support depolarization.

The newly created outdoor space introduces a multifunctional environment for communal activity. Given that ~ 45% of the people in Transvaalkwartier live in social housing (Ruimtelijke Groei Van Den Haag, n.d.) and the limited availability of private outdoor space, the addition of a communal garden, children's play area, and a conversation pit provides residents with opportunities for shared use, collective supervision and informal gathering. These elements resonate with third places, which Oldenburg (2023) identifies as essential for community cohesion. The conversation pit in particular offers a multifunctional framework for celebrations, dialogue and political discussions. Which will in turn enable residents to articulate and negotiate differences in a constructive manner.

The site's visibility from the tram line introduces an additional dimension. As the tram passes along the site's edge, the new public space and renovated buildings become a greeting card. This visibility may attract visitors in a manner comparable to the Haagse Markt, increasing the site's role as a landmark and expanding its reach beyond the neighbourhood.

Transforming the existing industrial buildings into a restaurant, multifunctional spaces, a repair cafe, workshop spaces, a library and a gym introduces new community serving functions. While some existing industrial activities may be displaced, the proposed programme offers a broad social value by providing educational, recreational and cultural amenities. These functions support skill building, physical wellbeing and social interaction. Which will contribute to a more resilient and interconnected community. Politically the project signals a shift towards an inclusive urban development, prioritizing shared public life over mono-functional industrial use.

Collectively the design fosters conditions for depolarizing public space by enhancing connectivity, enabling meaningful encounters and providing accessible, multifunctional environments that strengthen social cohesion across neighbourhood boundaries.

CONCLUSION

This research tried to answer the question: 'How can public spaces be designed and used to counteract political polarization, in the context of The Hague to ensure a better social connection between citizens?' The findings demonstrate that polarization is not only a political or social condition, but also a spatial one, shaped by the spaces in which people encounter one another. Political polarization is understood as the widening of ideological, emotional and perceived distance between groups and becomes problematic when it undermines democratic cooperation, weakens social cohesion and enables "us vs them" dynamics. (Dekker, 2022) On the site in The Hague these dynamics manifest spatially through contrasting voting patterns, symbolic street names tied to colonial histories and informal political expressions. The Transvaalkwartier demonstrates how political tensions become visible in the built environment and how public space becomes a stage where identities, complaints and aspirations are negotiated.

Within this context the role of the designer is not limited to shaping physical form but it extends to facilitating the social conditions under which depolarization can occur. Looking at Allport's Contact Hypothesis (McLeod, 2023) the research shows that public space can reduce social distance when they support equal status encounters, inclusive norms and shared activities. Oldenburg's (2023) concept of third places further highlights the importance of informal and accessible environments where diverse groups can meet. Ethnographic and spatial analysis revealed how residents inhabit an interpret space. Revealing the need for design interventions that respond to lived experience rather than just the form of the building.

The final design proposal uses these theoretical insights. By removing one of the industrial buildings on site it creates a passage between the Transvaalkwartier and the Schildersbuurt. The project enhances accessibility between politically distinct neighbourhoods, encouraging everyday encounters that may soften social boundaries. The introduction of a conversation pit, communal garden, children's play area, and multifunctional outdoor space addresses the lack of useable private outdoor space. These spaces function as third places that support informal gathering, shared ownership and political dialogue, which will foster depolarization.

The adaptive reuse of the two industrial buildings, further strengthens the project's social and political impact. By transforming them into a restaurant, repair cafe workshop spaces, library and gym the design introduces functions that will serve the community. And they will promote learning, skill building, recreation and cultural exchange. These interventions align with the architectural ambition to create inclusive, multifunctional and social environments. While the technical ambition of reusing existing structures supports sustainable and resource efficient development. The site's visibility from the tram line amplifies its presence, which provides a possibility for the project to become a landmark that invites engagement from beyond the immediate neighbourhood.

To summarize, the research shows that public spaces can counteract political polarization when they are designed as inclusive, accessible and socially meaningful environments that support every day encounters across different groups of people. The final design embodies this principle by transforming a formerly industrial site into a connective, multifunctional and community oriented public space. Which strengthens the social cohesion and contributes to a more resilient and democratic urban fabric in The Hague.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research represents an initial, exploratory investigation into the ways architectural design can contribute to counteracting political polarization. Because the project was situated specifically within The Hague and more precisely within the Transvaalkwartier. The findings and the design outcomes are shaped by the social, spatial and political characteristics of this particular context. The neighbourhood's demographic composition, historical layers, spatial configurations and visible expressions of political sentiment all informed the analytical framework and the resulting design proposal. Therefore the intervention developed in this study cannot be transferred directly to other locations without substantial adaptation.

The project intentionally sought a site specific response, grounded in ethnographic observation and spatial analysis. These methods revealed how residents inhabit and interpret their environment, how political tensions manifest in everyday space and where the opportunities for depolarizing encounters might emerge. Because such dynamics vary significantly across urban contexts any future application of this research would require a renewed analysis tailored to the social and spatial conditions of the new site. This included reassessing local forms of polarization, identifying relevant community needs and understanding how public space is currently used and contested.

In this sense the study does not propose a universal model for depolarizing design, but rather demonstrates how architectural interventions can be developed through a context-sensitive, research-driven process. Further exploration of this should therefore begin with a comparable methodological approach, which combines spatial data, ethnographic insight and political analysis to determine what forms of public space are most appropriate and effective in the given setting.

Within this highly site specific scope of this research also lies an important recommendation for future inquiry. While this study intentionally focused on the unique spatial, social and political conditions of the Transvaalkwartier, further research could explore whether a more generalizable framework for depolarizing public space can be developed. Instead of relying solely on a hyper contextual analysis, following studies might investigate how a universal design model for depolarization could be formulated to guide interventions across diverse urban contexts. Such a model would require comparative research, testing how principles derived from this project translate to different cultural, demographic and spatial contexts.

REFLECTION

The graduating students this year were the first ones to work with the newly implemented thesis structure, which reduced the time available for research and design development. Both students and tutors had to adapt to this revised framework. Due to City of the future being a research intense studio, the compressed timeline often created a sense that the research work needed to be accelerated, to ensure design work would not fall behind. This could sometimes lead to personal frustration, as I wanted to conduct a more extensive research but I had to keep in mind the practical limits of the available time. Balancing the demands of a rigorous research and iterative design process proved to be a recurring challenge and it showed the structural pressure embedded in the new graduation system

Throughout the thesis time seemed to be a recurring challenge. Prior to beginning I had the idea that eight months would be enough time to work on a project. However architectural work is iterative and open ended, projects evolve continuously and the sense of completion is never there for me. As the project developed it became increasingly clear that the available time was insufficient to explore all dimensions of the topic to a desired depth.

The main area where this limitation was most prevalent is the fieldwork. Although I have had several talks with residents of the Transvaalkwartier during my site visits, the conversations remained limited. The neighbourhood has a wide variety of ethnicities and therefore also languages. There are some residents who do not speak Dutch or English, with additional time it could have been possible to talk to these people with the help of a translator. Which could have given a richer understanding of for example the Eastern European worker migrants. Such fieldwork would have strengthened the project and made the analysis of the lived experience more thorough, aligning closely with the principles of ethnographic research.

Similarly extended time would have allowed for testing the design proposal among residents. With the testing the intervention could have been discussed to see if the design met all their desires and needs. It could have provided insightful feedback within an iterative design process. The participatory testing also aligns with the wish to have a collaborative and engaged community to hopefully counteract polarization.

After deciding to transform an industrial area within the neighbourhood, formal drawings were requested from the municipality. Unfortunately I had to wait over a month to be able to see these drawings, which halted me in my design process. The month long waiting period slowed down the progress, as the interim design work was based on assumptions taken from maps and exterior observations. Once I got to see the drawings, additional time was needed to digitalize the drawings. These delays shortened the design phase, resulting in drawings that did not fully reflect the level of refinement originally intended, during my final tutoring sessions.

Overall time is the main dissatisfactory element for me within my thesis process. Yet this reflection also shows a broader reality of architectural practice, projects are rarely experienced as fully done. Even with additional time the desire to keep adding and changing would probably still exist. This experience therefore highlights the importance of planning, prioritizing and accepting incompleteness that is part of being an architecture student.

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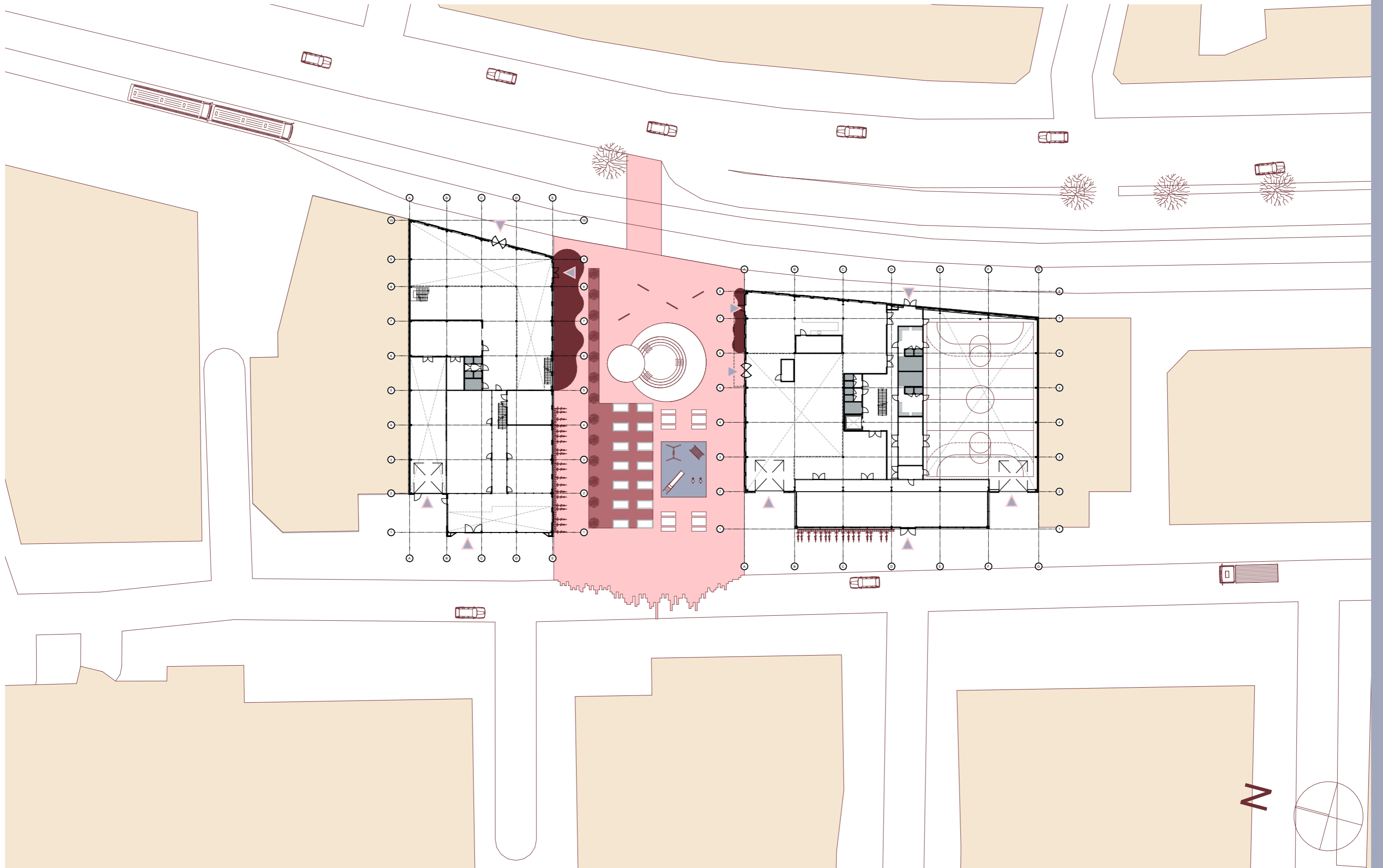
FIGURE LIST

- [1] Map generated with Mapbox
- [2] *Driekwart van de Nederlanders denkt dat polarisatie toeneemt.* (2022, December 29). Sociaal En Cultuur Planbureau. <https://www.scp.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/12/29/ergernis-over-harde-toon-en-extreme-uitingen-in-politieke-en-publieke-debat>
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- [9] Diagram created by author with Adobe illustrator
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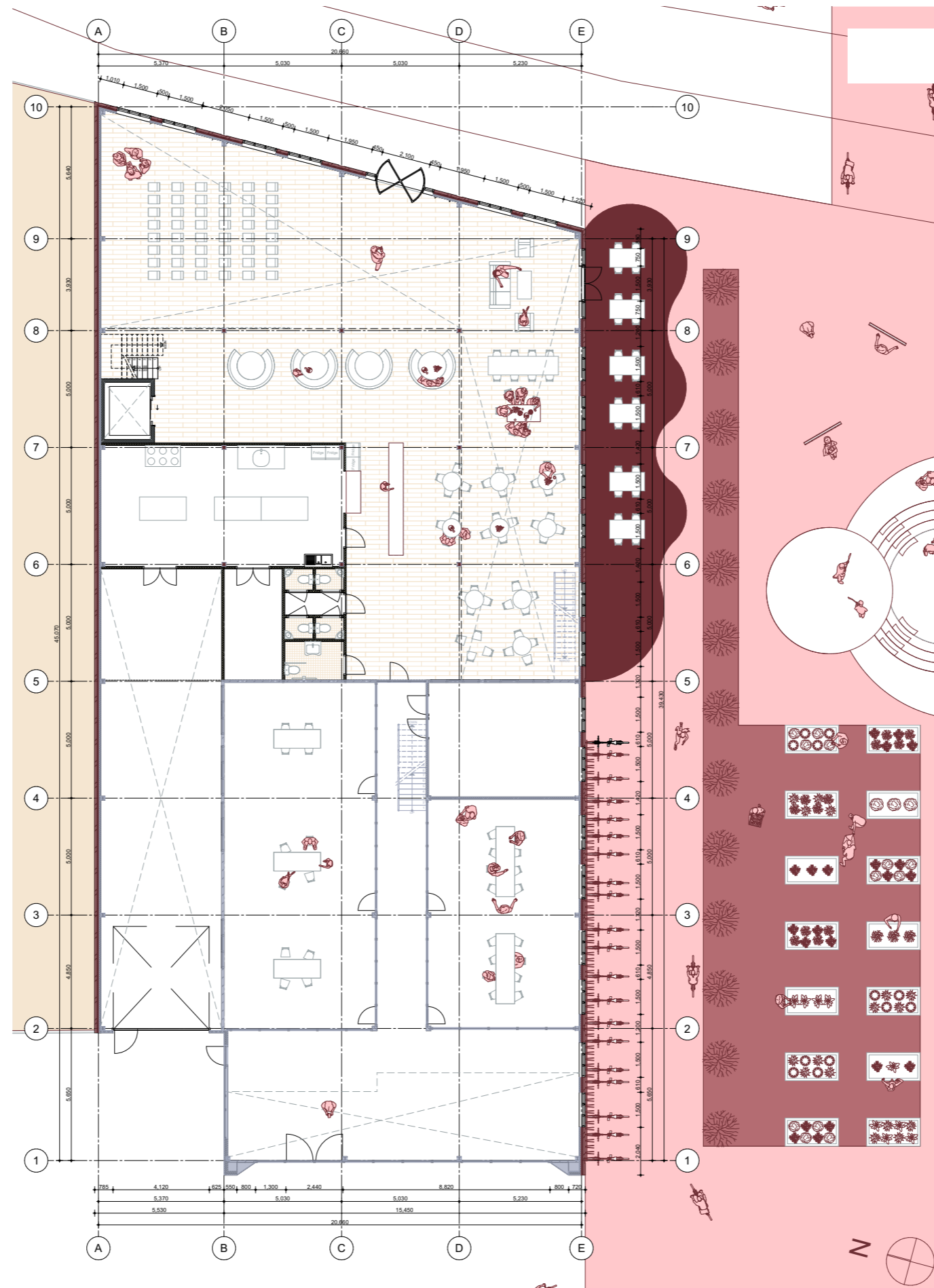
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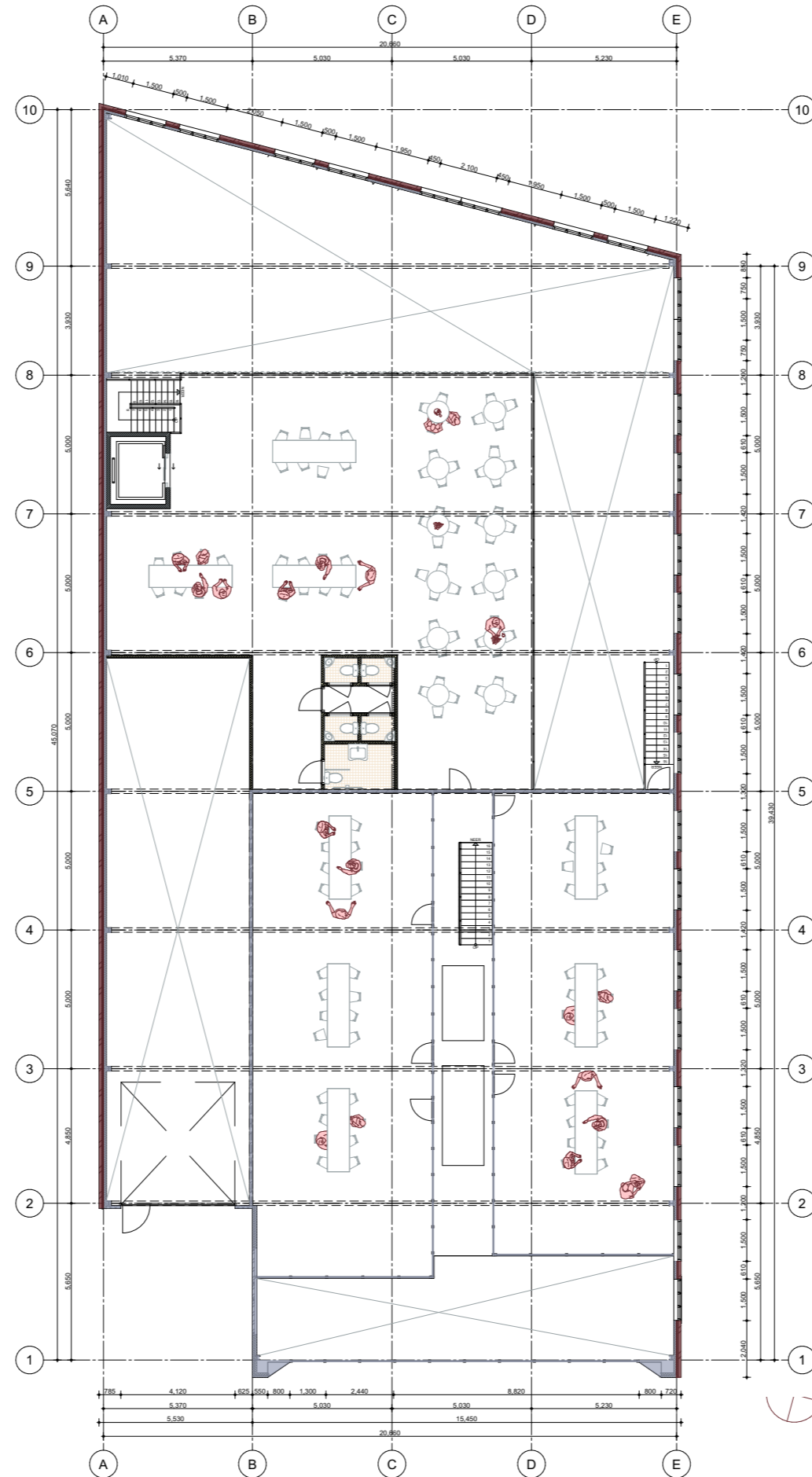
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FIRST FLOOR NORTH BUILDING



NORTH BUILDING

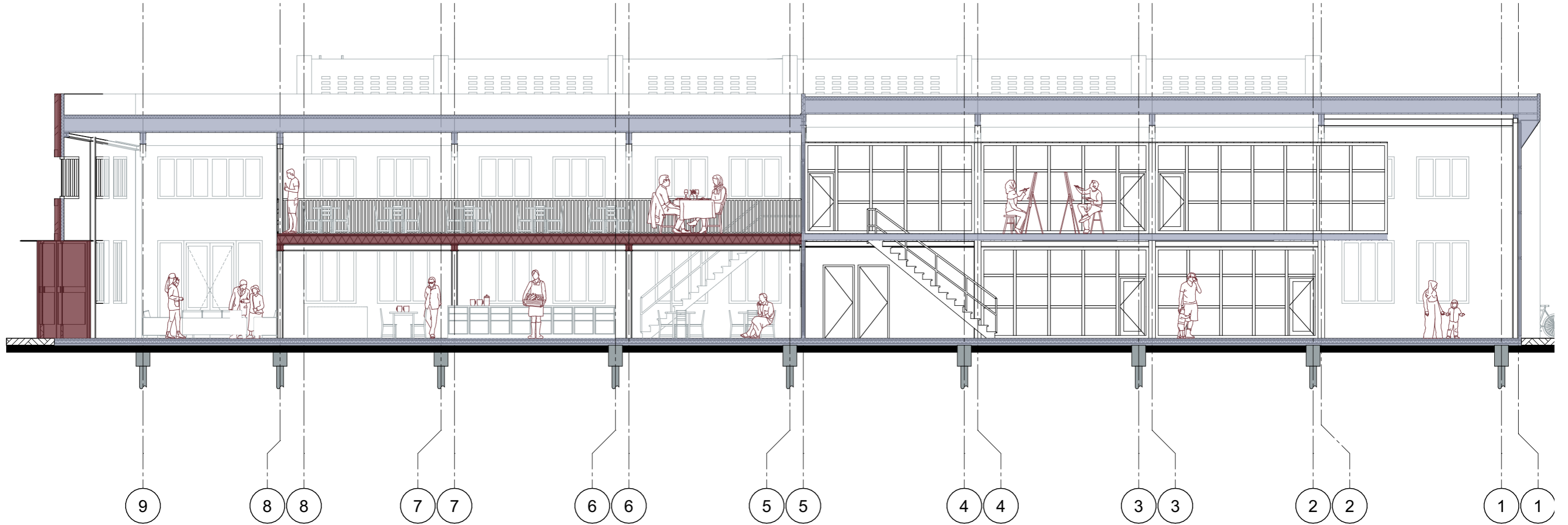
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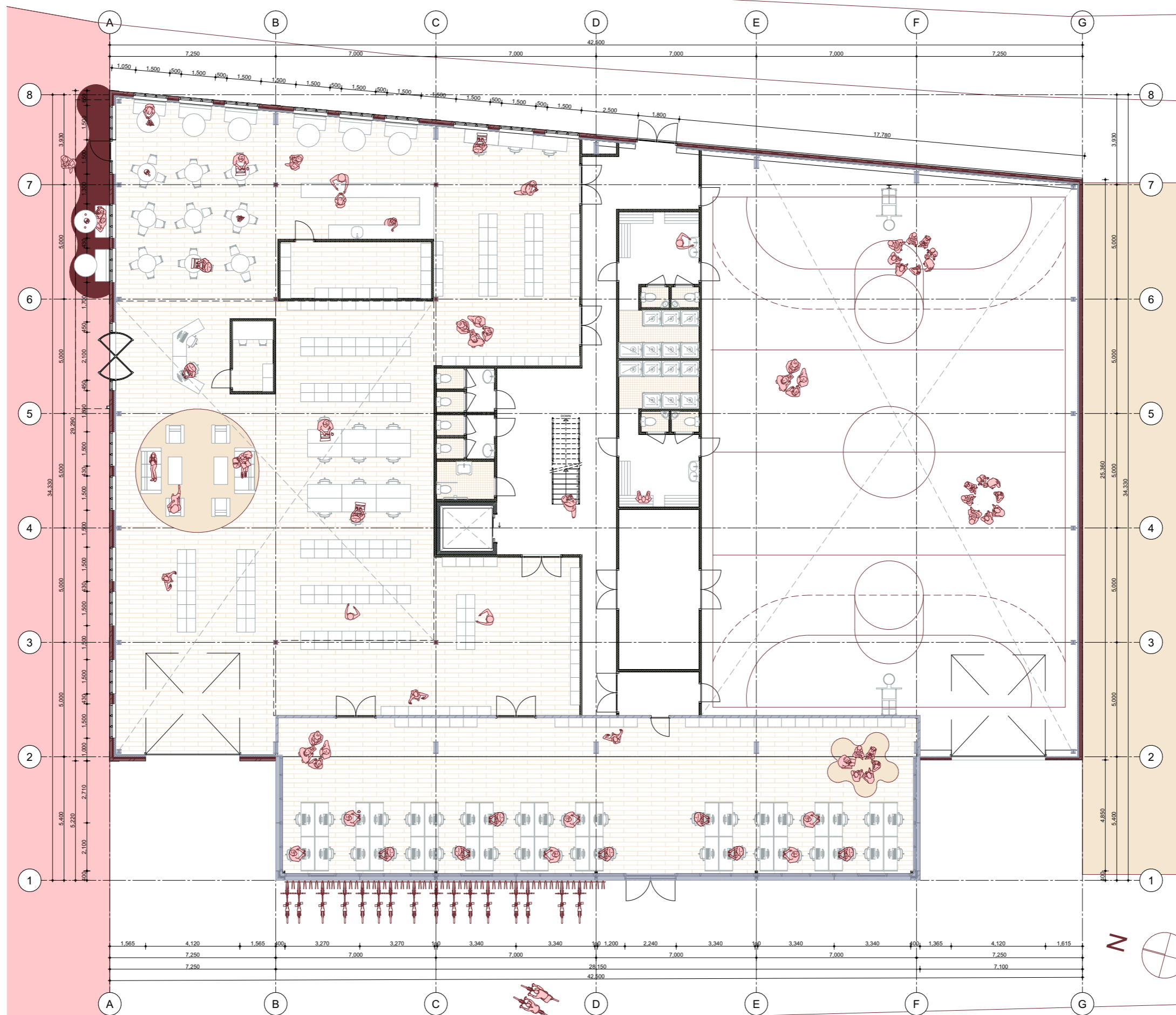
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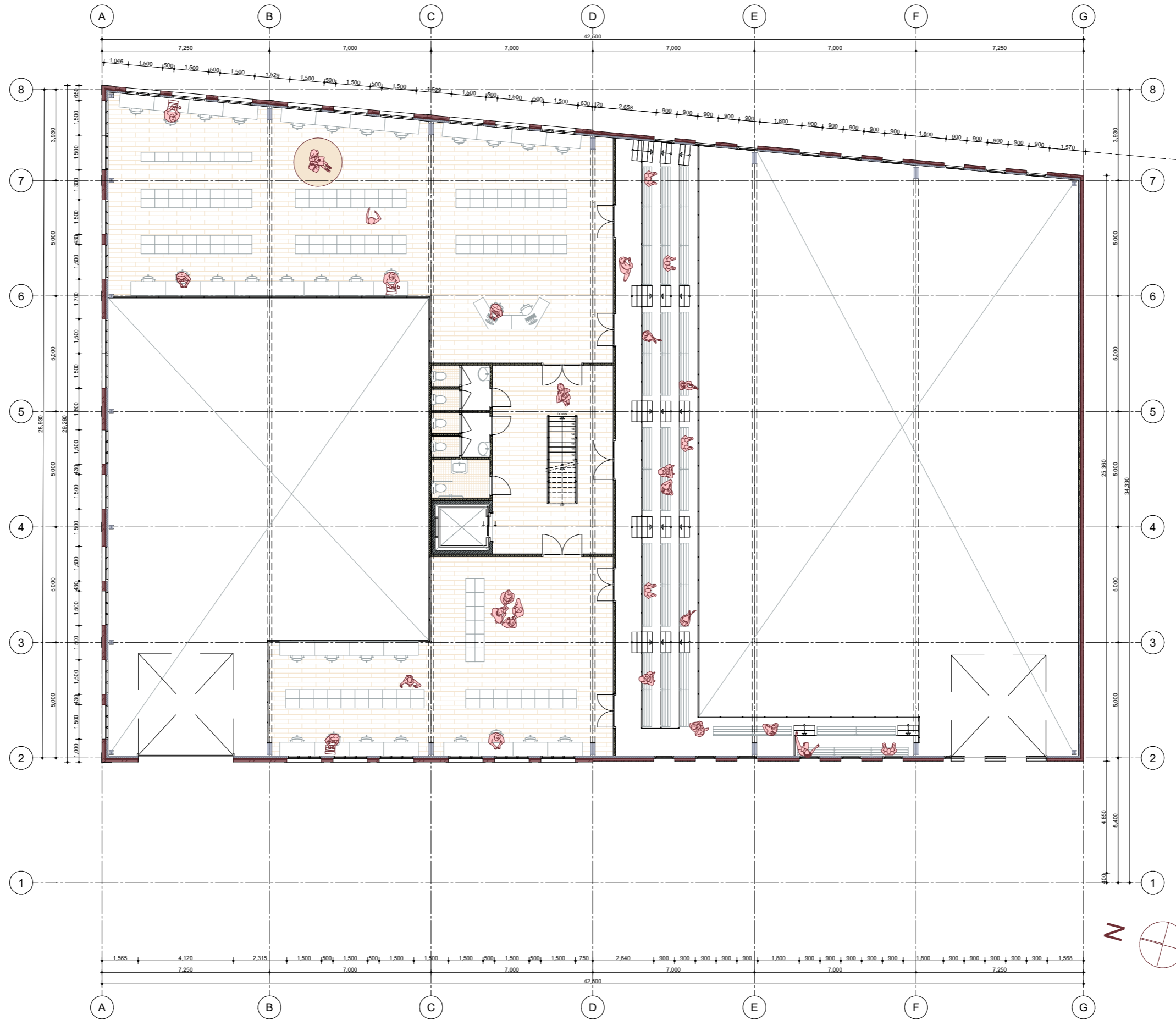
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GROUND FLOOR SOUTH BUILDING



FIRST FLOOR SOUTH BUILDING



SOUTH BUILDING

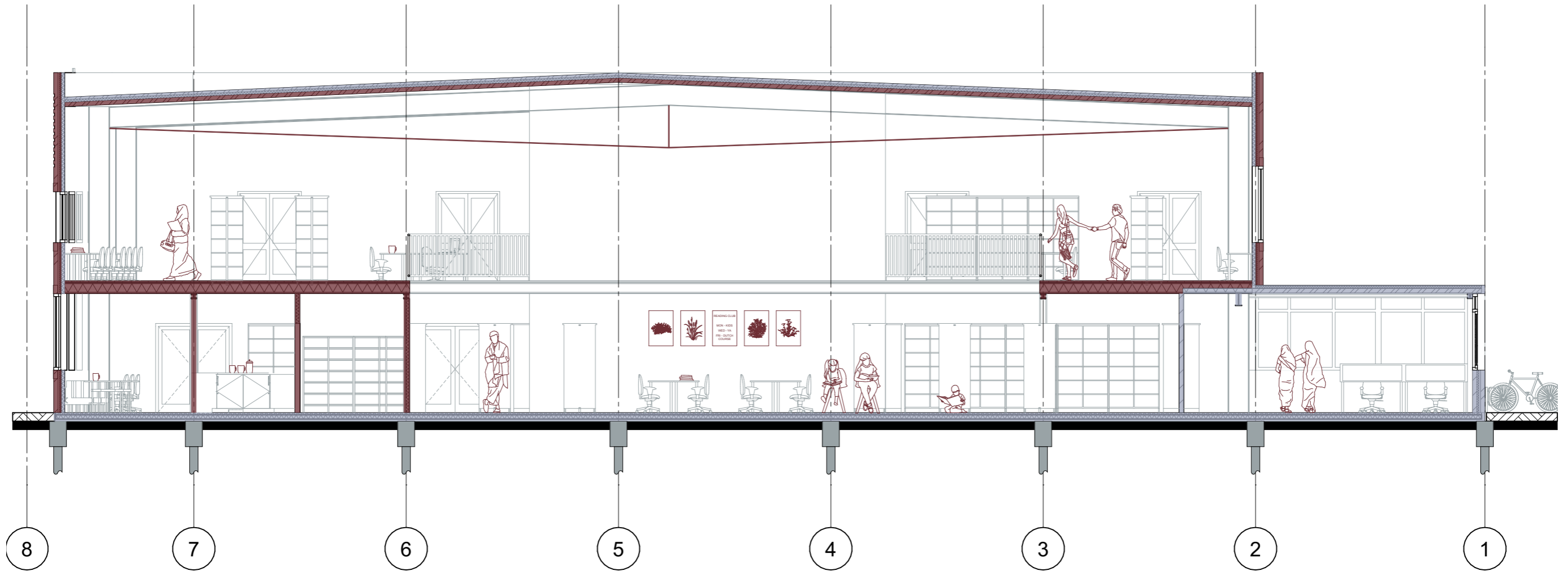
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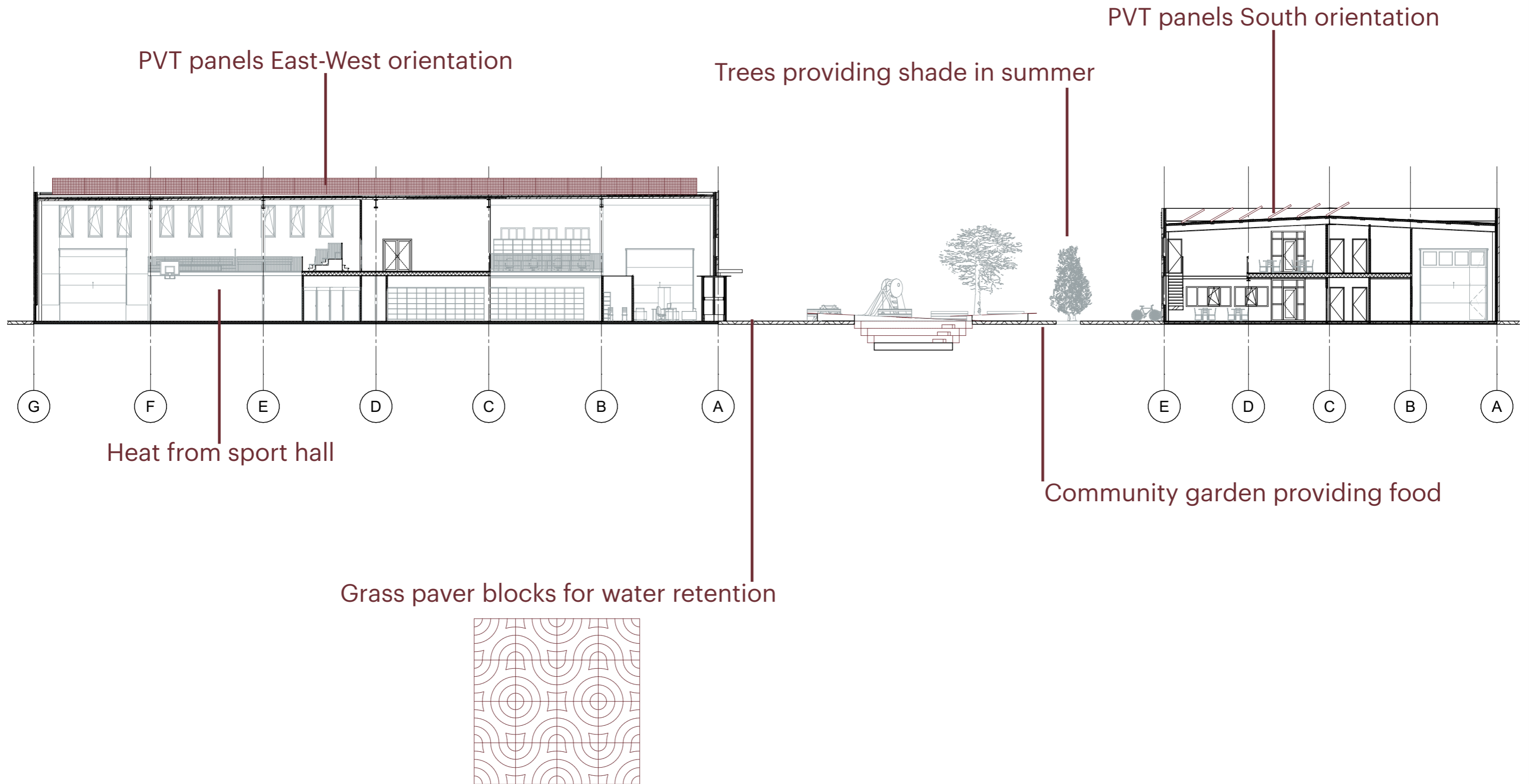
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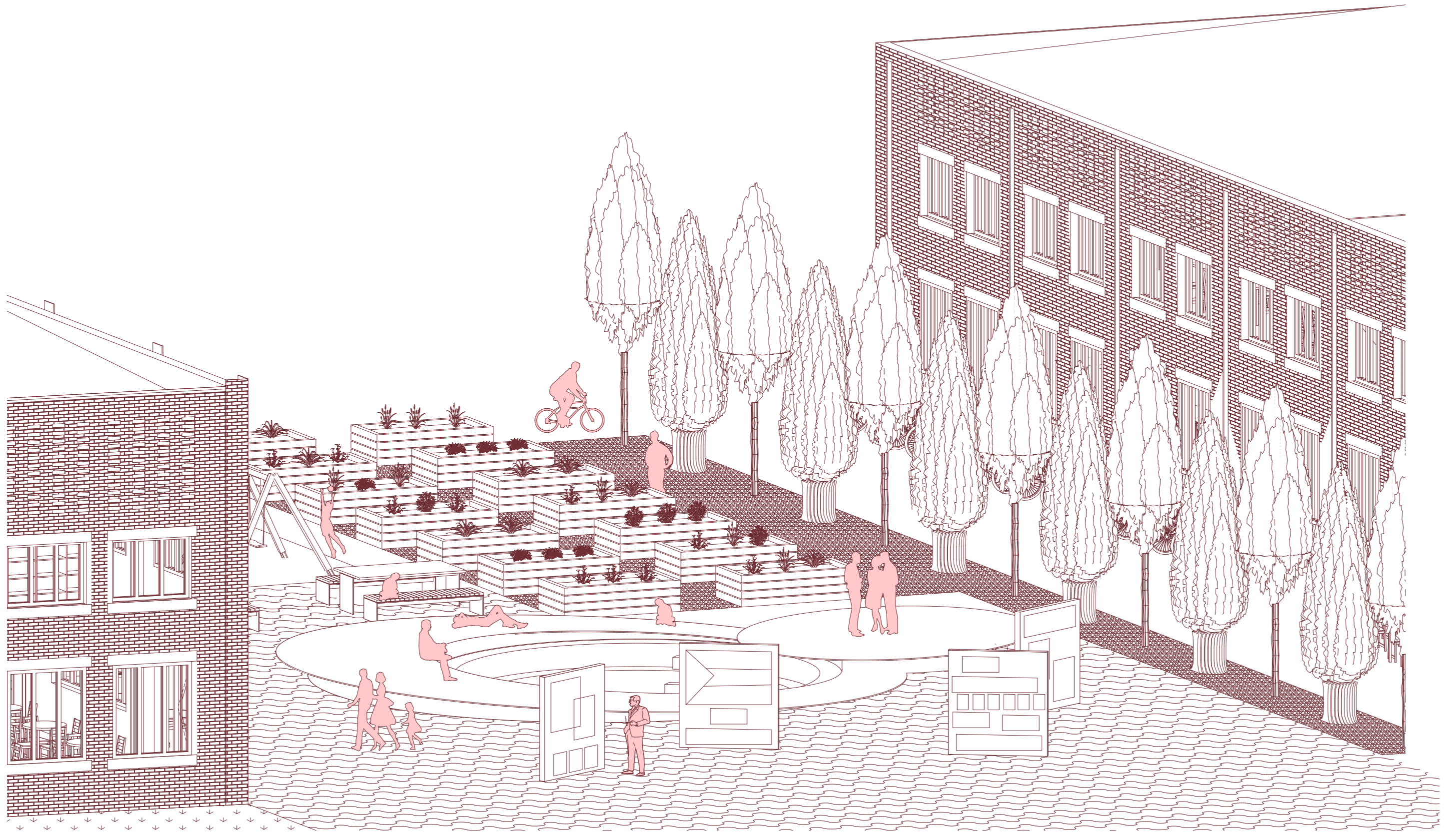
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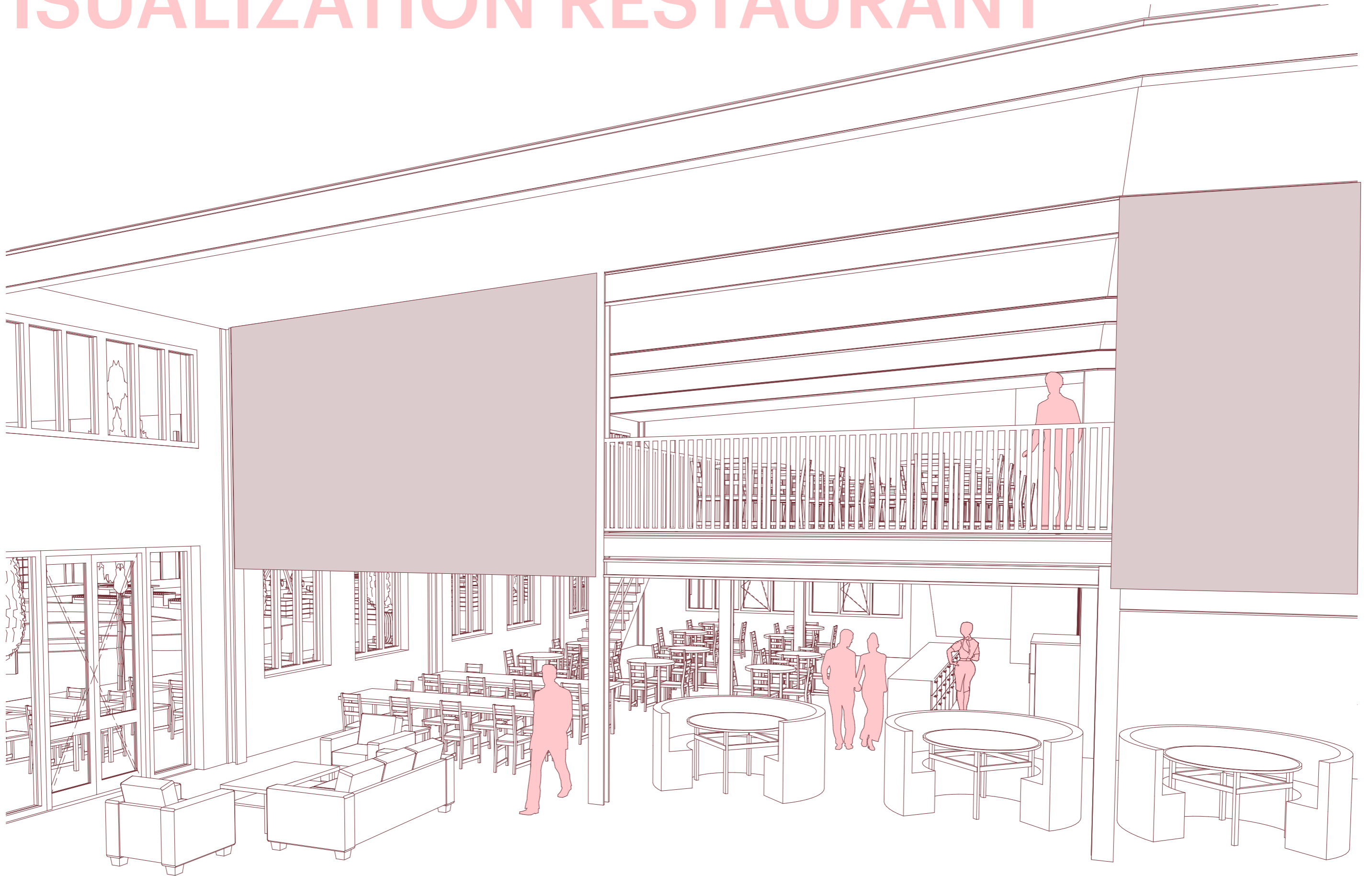
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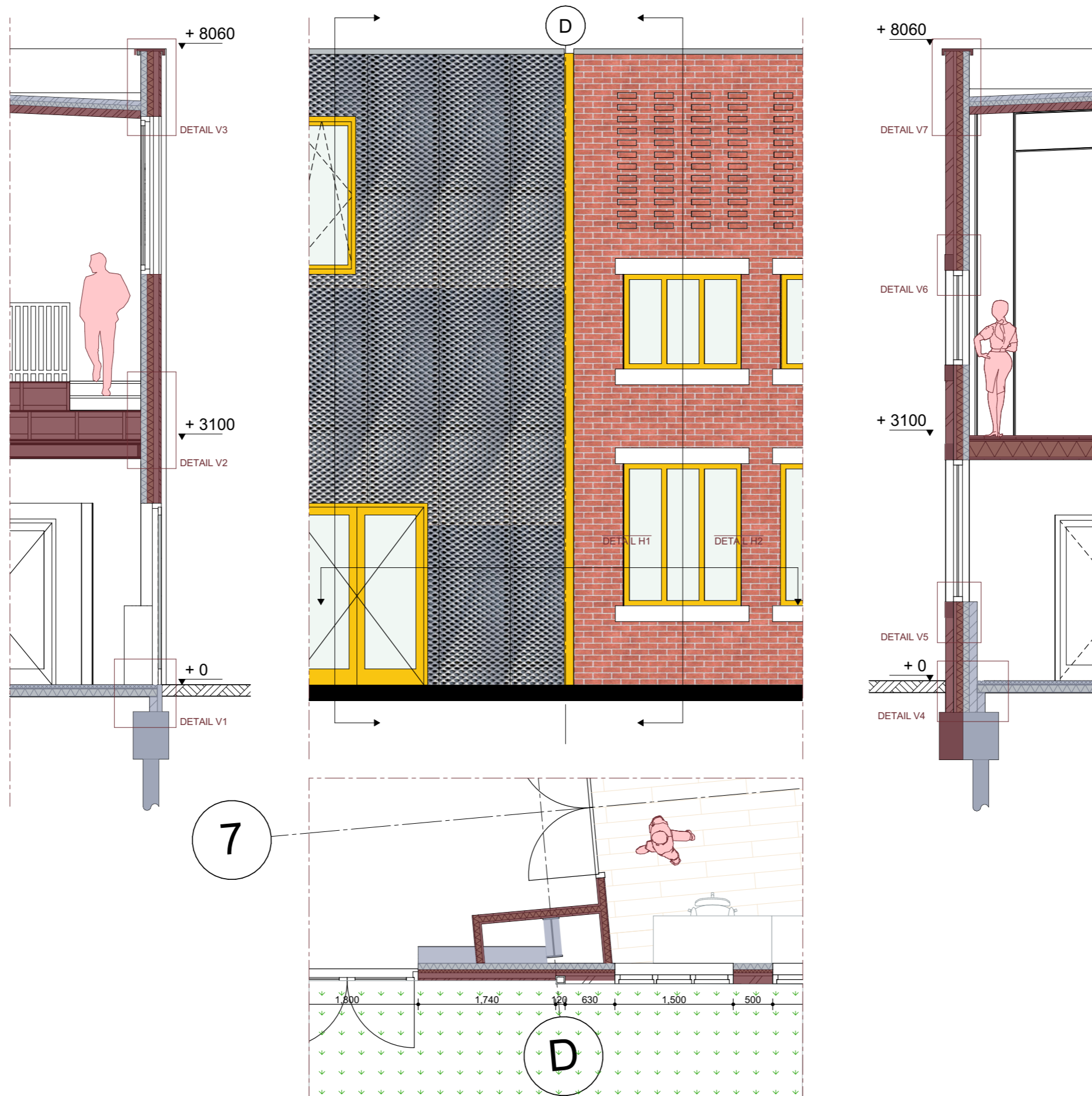
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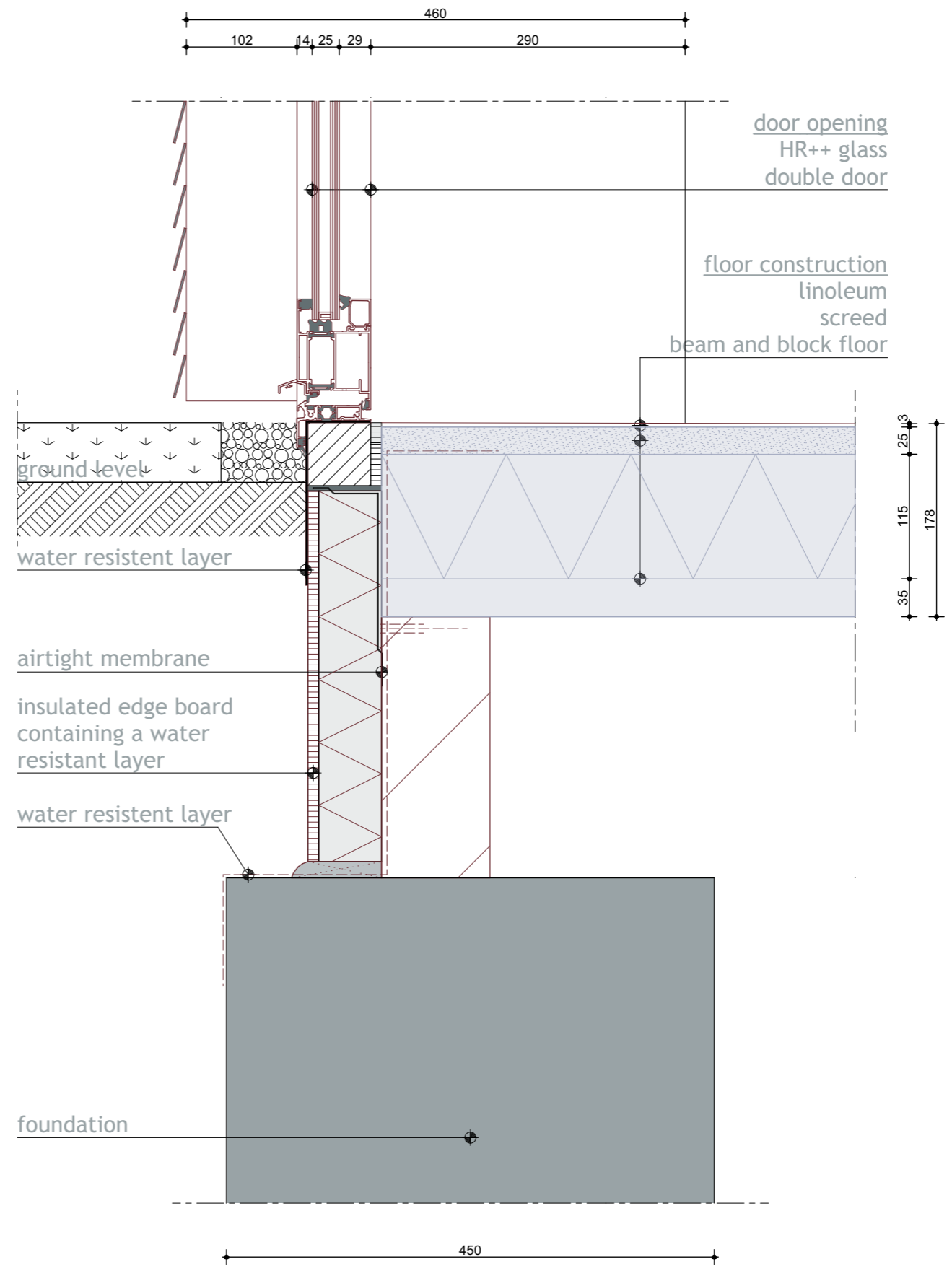
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FACADE FRAGMENT



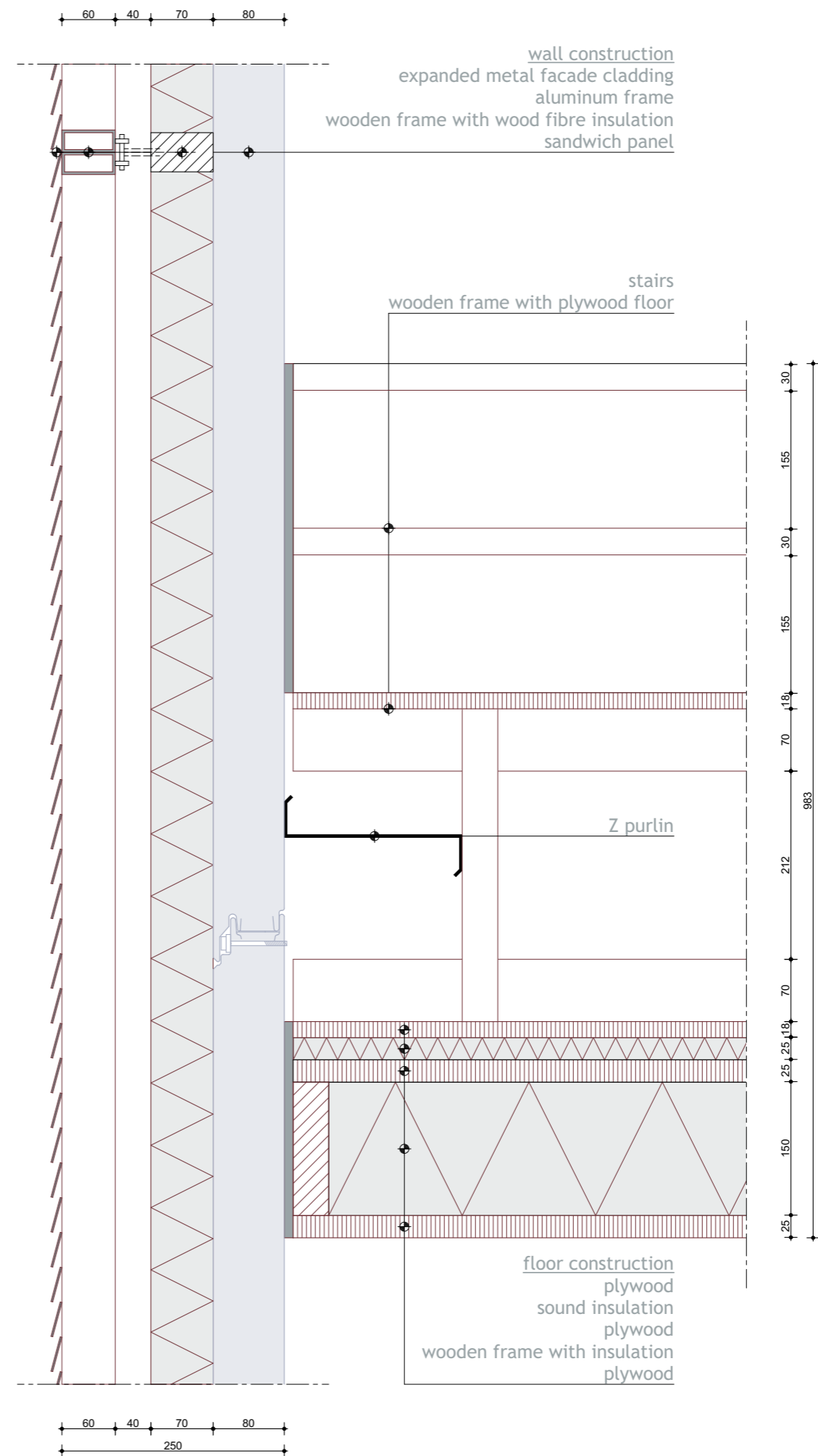
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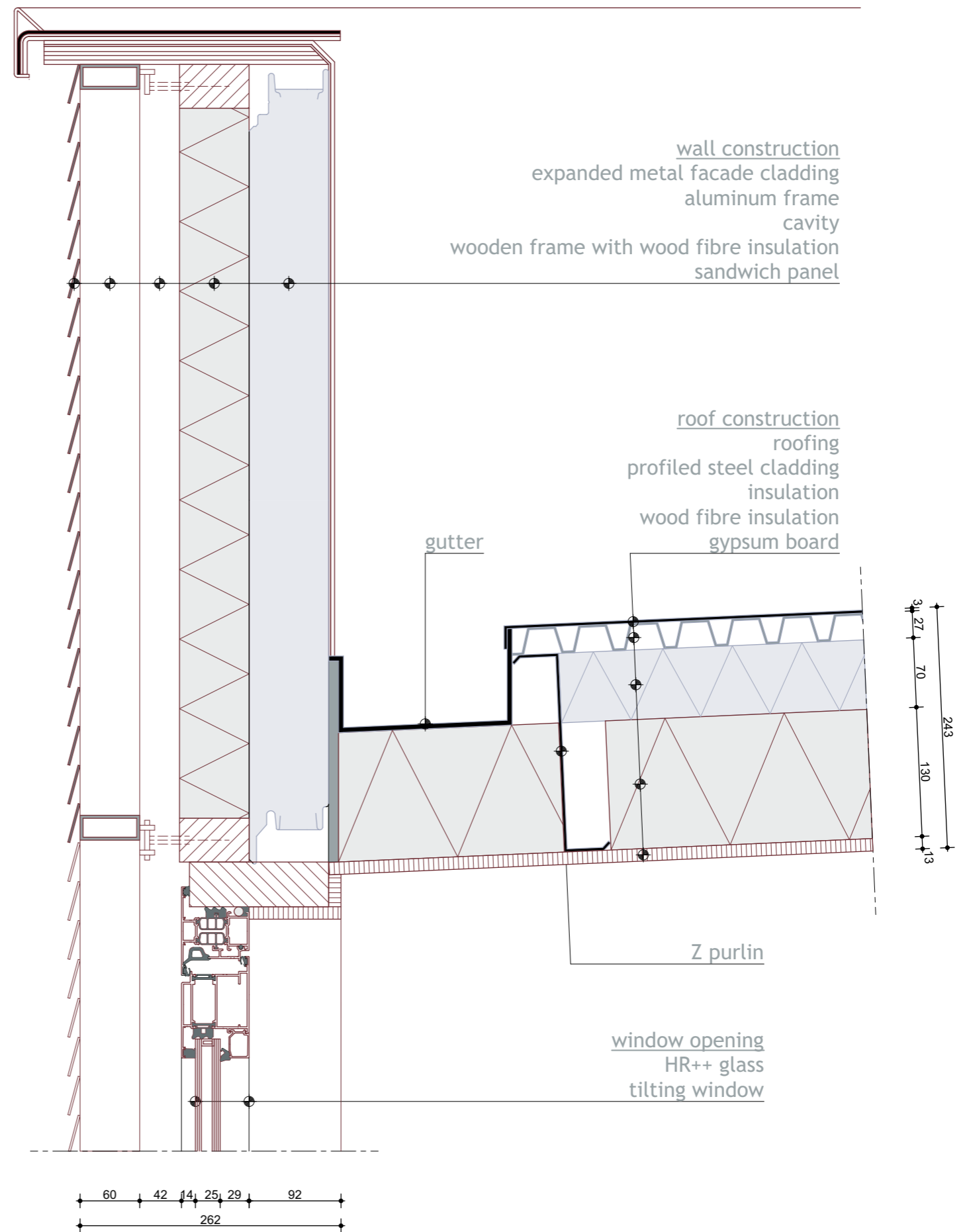
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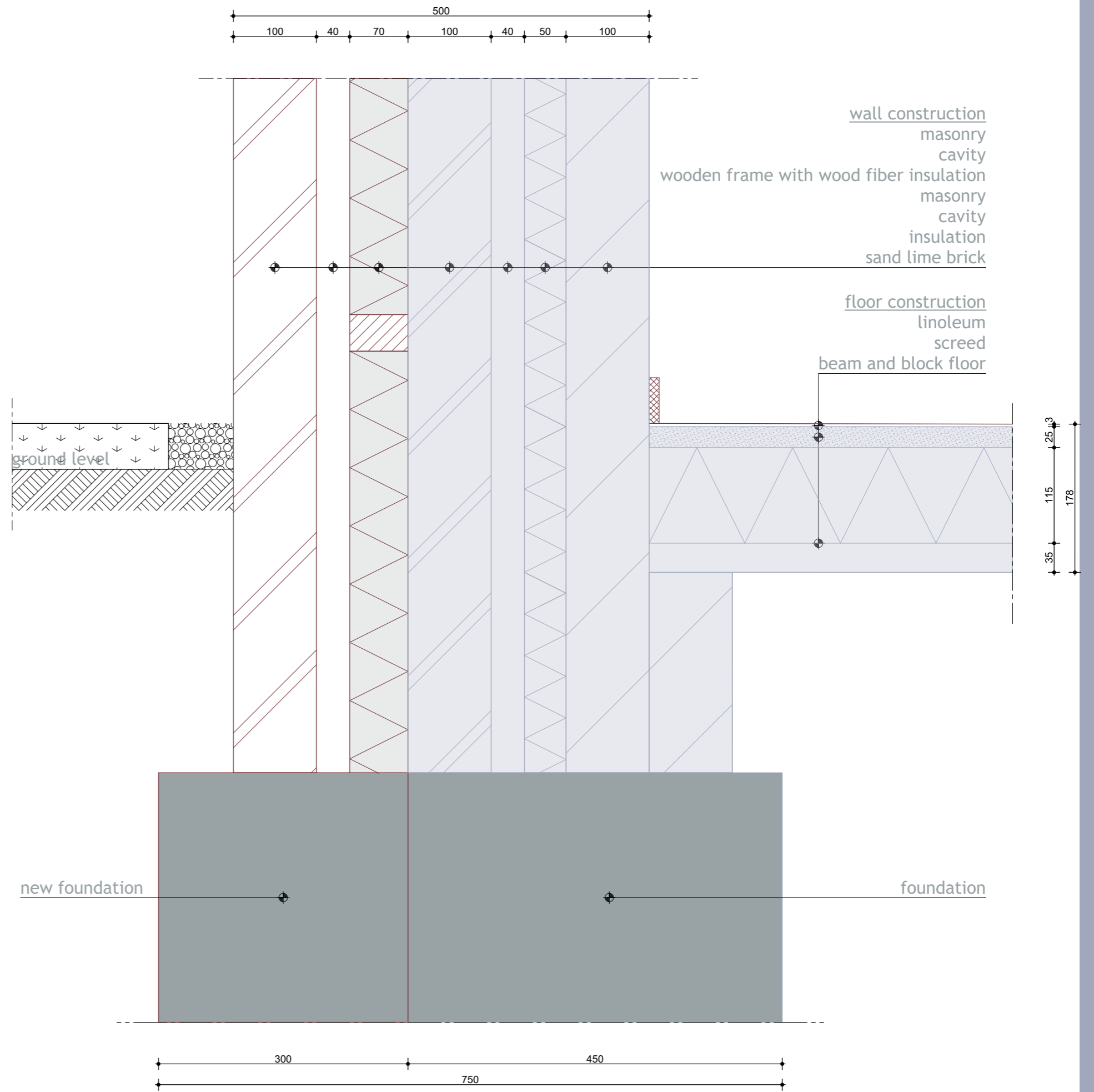
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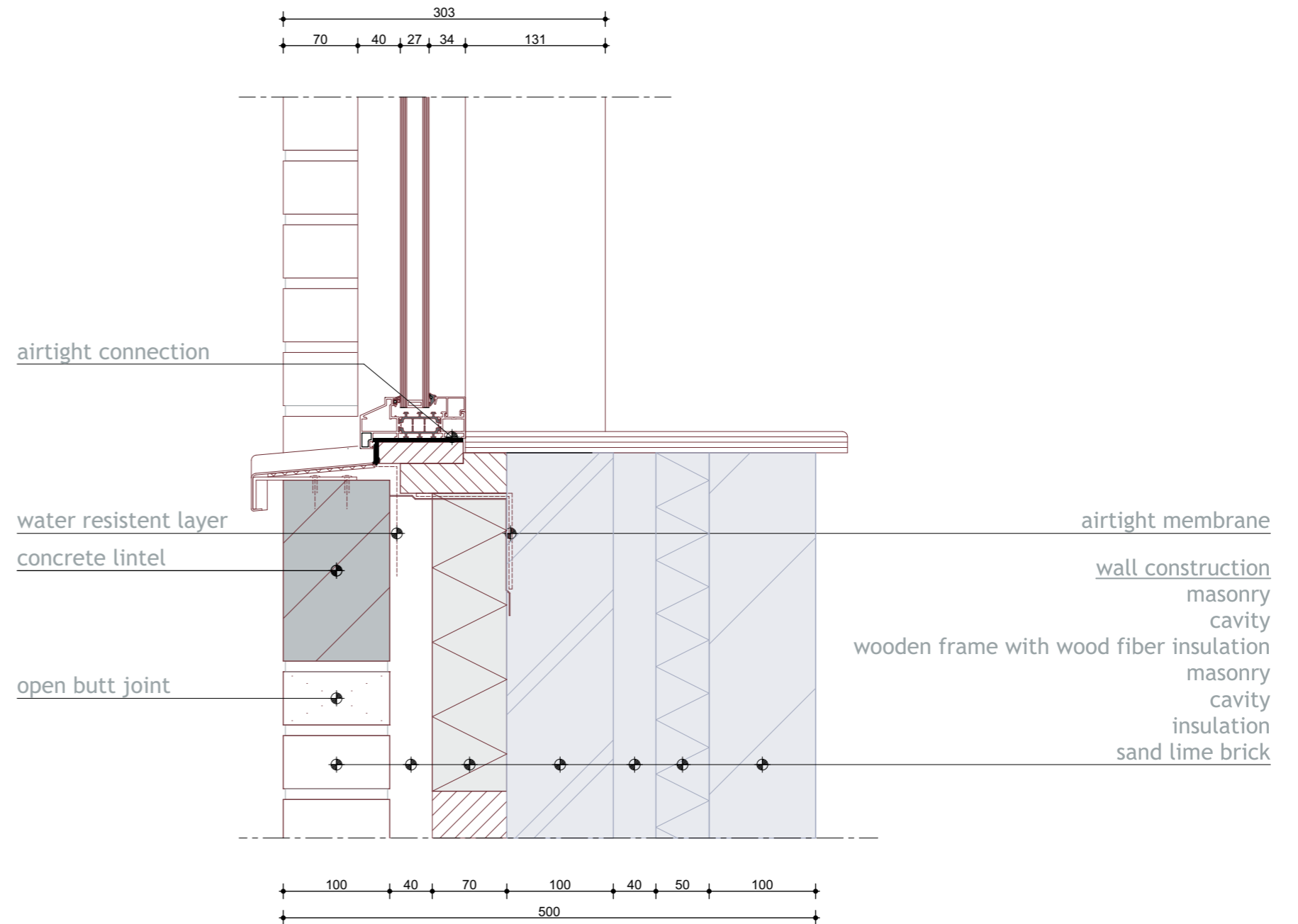
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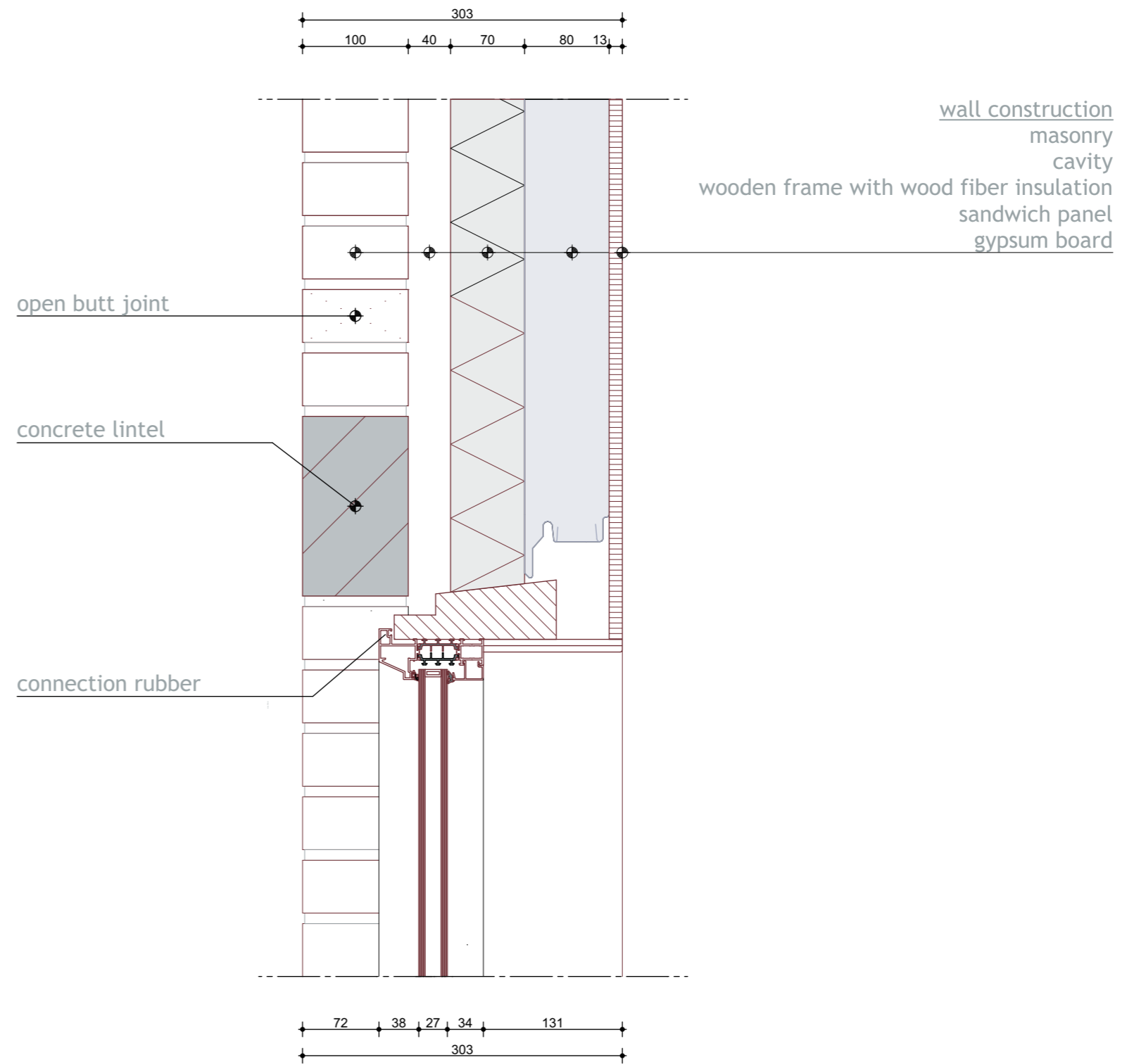
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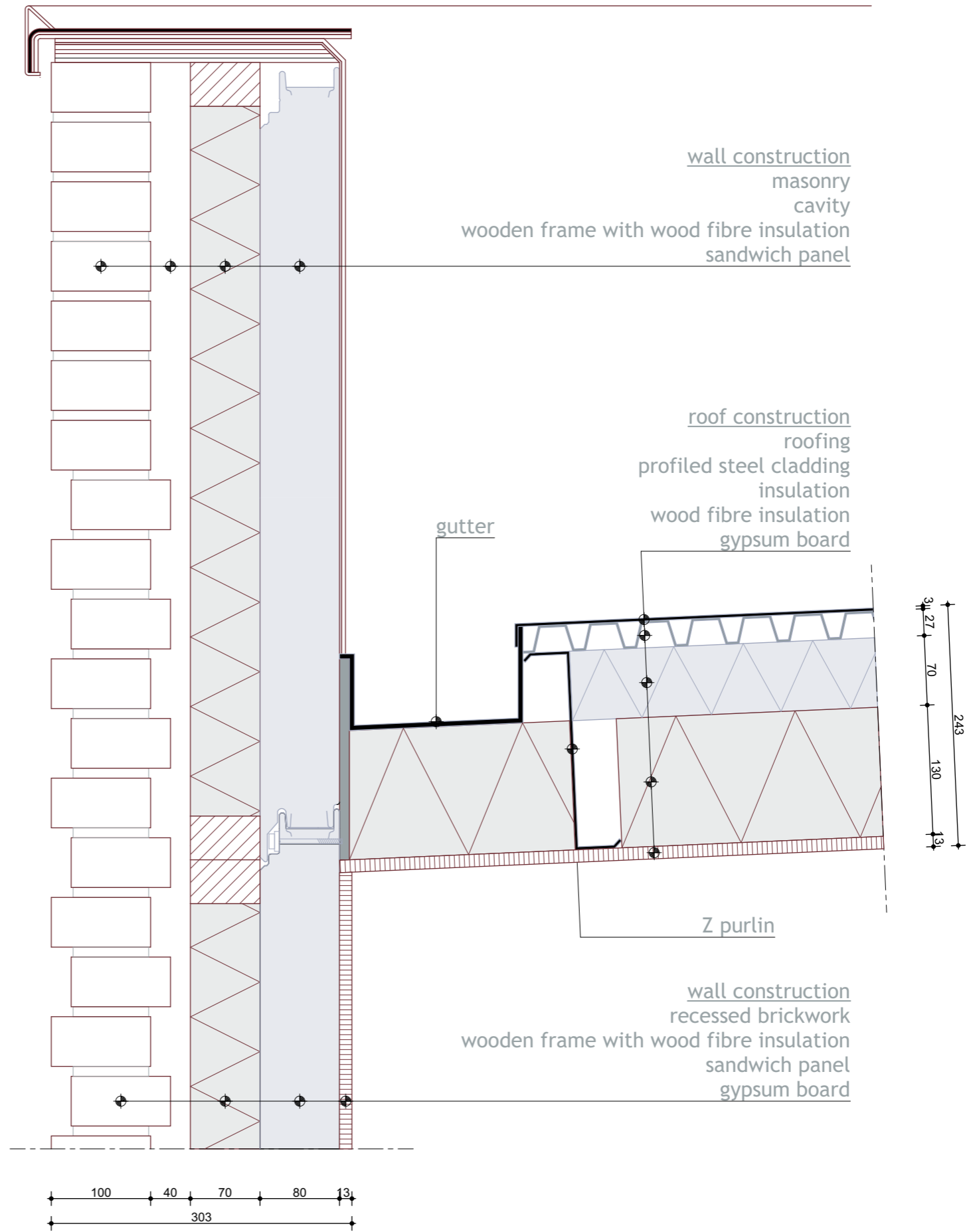
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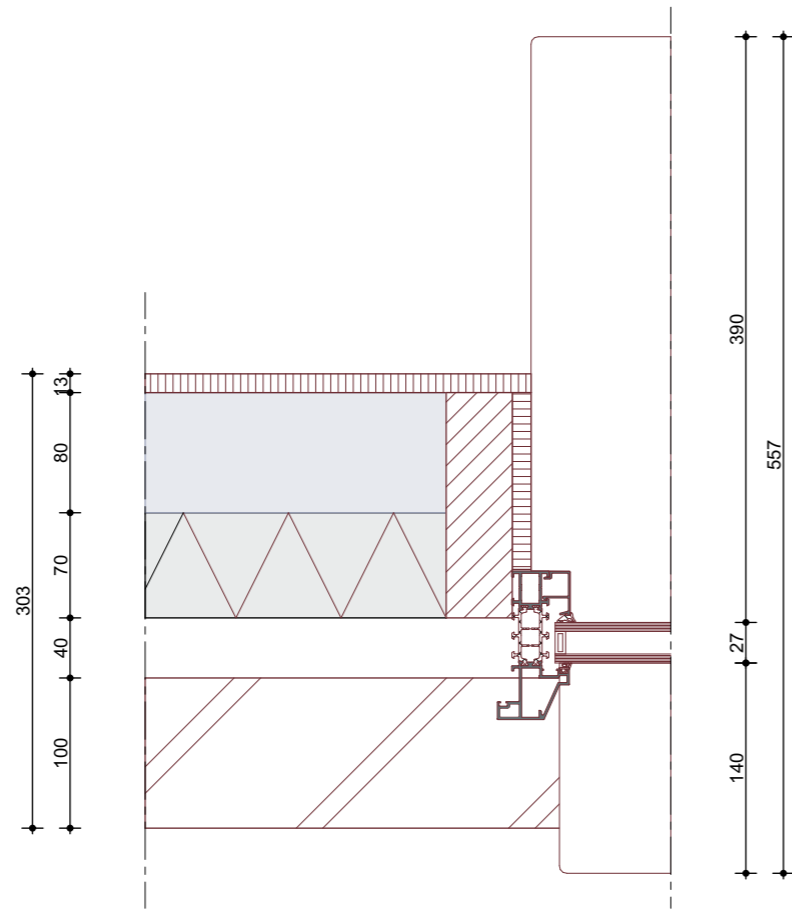
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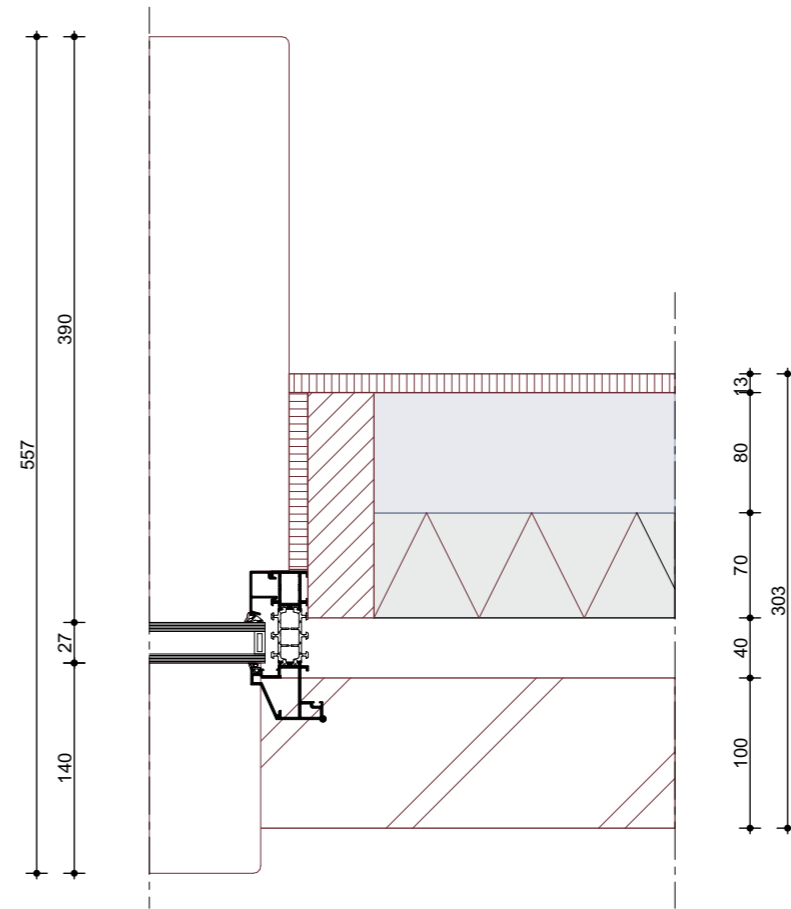
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DETAIL H1 AND DETAIL H2



DETAIL H1
scale 1:5



DETAIL H2
scale 1:5

Existing
New