



# FINAL REFLECTION

EMMY  
VERMEULEN  
JUNE 23, 2025

### **Introduction**

My graduation project focuses on the role of informal care networks within the neighborhood of Tarwewijk, Rotterdam. The starting point was my interest in care ethics, and more specifically in feminist care ethics, which centers around interrelational relationships and mutual support. In the context of an aging society and a growing pressure on formal care systems, I believe there is a need to rethink how we care for one another, in ways that are local, informal, and embedded in the social fabric of everyday life. My research aimed to make these networks visible and to extract spatial principles from them that could inform architectural interventions promoting connection and informal care.

### **Relation to Master Programme and Studio**

My graduation project closely aligns with the Architecture track, in which design-driven research is used to address urgent societal questions spatially. The MSc Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences programme emphasizes the integration of spatial, social, and cultural factors a combination reflected in my choice to link care ethics and participatory research with architectural design.

The studio Designing for Care in an Inclusive Environment provided an appropriate framework: care is not limited to formal care institutions, but rather approached as a relational and everyday practice that requires inclusive and supportive environments. My project contributes to this vision by exploring how architecture can support informal care relationships within the neighborhood context and strengthen social cohesion through spatial interventions and providing communality.

### **Reflection on Approach and Methods**

The methodology of my research was based on qualitative, participatory research, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and spatial analysis. This combination proved effective in uncovering how informal care relationships emerge in Tarwewijk and where they physically take place in public and semi-public. The idea of situated knowledge (Tuana, 2017) strongly informed my analysis. A single story, though not statistically representative, still holds deep value. This human-centered perspective enabled me to recognize patterns and spatial implications rooted in people's lived experiences.

One method that proved less effective was my attempt to organize a group conversation in the form of a workshop. I had hoped this would reach residents I might not otherwise engage, but in practice, the conversation lacked structure and depth. Ultimately, individual observations and relationship-building through repeat visits to care-related spaces proved far more insightful. These encounters created a level of trust that allowed residents to share more personal and often invisible forms of care, insights that did not surfaced in a group setting.

The choice to conduct short street interviews also created a methodological tension. While I was able to speak with many people, the conversations often lacked depth. This experience made me reconsider my assumptions about inclusivity and reach. While brief street interviews allowed me to speak with a broad range of residents, the lack of depth limited their value. In future research, I would prioritize fewer, longer

conversations that allow for more nuanced understanding and emotional context, especially when studying informal and relational phenomena like care.

Overall, this process highlighted the importance of adaptability and attentiveness in fieldwork. Methods that prioritize trust, time, and presence were most effective in revealing the subtle spatial and emotional dynamics of care. These insights not only enriched my research but also shaped my design approach, reminding me that spatial design must begin with listening.

### Research and Design in Interaction

Many of the ideas in my design emerged from the research and fieldwork I conducted. Bruno Di Bello's artwork *Analisi e Sintesi* (1973) offers a compelling visual metaphor for how I understand the design process (Figure 1). At the top of the piece, the word *Analisi* (analysis) symbolizes the act of breaking down complex realities, observing, documenting, and understanding the conditions of a site or community. At the bottom, *Sintesi* (synthesis) refers to the act of reassembling those insights into spatial or conceptual interventions. The central area of the work, a dense and layered grid of fragmented letters, evokes the actual experience of designing: iterative, nonlinear, and often unresolved.

Rather than presenting a linear progression from research to result, Di Bello's work captures design as an entangled process of interpretation and transformation. Analysis and synthesis are not separate stages, but overlapping modes of working that inform one another. The grid's structured layout suggests a methodology, but the visual noise and fragmentation within it point to uncertainty,

experimentation, and continuous negotiation between different kinds of knowledge.

This interpretation aligns with how I approached my graduation project in Tarwewijk. I began with fieldwork (*analisi*), grounding my understanding in lived experiences and spatial observations. As I moved into drawing, model-making, and speculative interventions, the process became increasingly fluid. Decisions were shaped by earlier insights but also generated new questions. Even in later stages, analysis returned, and synthesis remained in development. Di Bello's piece reminds me that design is not the direct application of research, but a dialogue between intuition, knowledge, and form that evolves through making.

**Figure 1.** Bruno Di Bello, *Analisi/Sintesi* (1973). Photograph by Amedeo Benestante. Source: Fondazione Donnaregina per le arti contemporanee, n.d., <https://www.madrenapoli.it/collezione/bruno-di-bello/>.



Reflecting on this, I also recognize how the studio's structure aimed to support this design process by encouraging us to translate our research into 'design guidelines.' While this strategy helped kick-start the design phase and gave a sense of direction, it also highlighted some limitations. The guidelines acted more like scaffolding than true synthesis, helpful, but ultimately too rigid to hold the complexity of what had been uncovered during fieldwork. In my case, there was very little time between finishing the research and writing the guidelines, which made this stage feel compressed and overly rationalized. This underscored for me that genuine synthesis requires space to reflect, to dwell in uncertainty, and to allow ideas to unfold gradually through making.

But there are some examples of research findings influencing design decisions in a more direct way. A specific example is a moment in which an Iranian woman offered to pluck my eyebrows during a community gathering. She invited me to a spot behind a structural wall, visually open, yet spatially sheltered enough to perform an intimate act of care. This inspired the design of the prominent rectangular columns in the residential buildings and the community kitchen, elements that provide sheltered spaces for informal care.

A second example is the programmatic idea for a neighborhood kitchen, emerged from repeated observations of food as a bonding agent in care relationships. In my design, the kitchen is an open, collective space with multiple entrances, no strict division between cooking and eating, and a focus on shared use. This distinguishes it from a restaurant, the kitchen and eating is not the goal itself, but rather a means

to facilitate connection, which in turn facilitates informal care.

One notable challenge I faced was that my research focused mainly on informal care in public and semi-public spaces, while my design also had to include housing. Since I had no access to private domestic spaces during the research phase, I lacked insight into how care manifests at home. As a result, I felt less confident in justifying my design decisions regarding the housing component. To navigate this gap, I turned to knowledge from my own life and previous studies, especially my research on feminist floorplans. These sources offered insight into how spatial arrangements can support or hinder care within domestic environments. I used this background to make speculative yet grounded design decisions that aimed to foster care at home.

### **Responding to Feedback and Design Development**

Following the P2 presentation, the primary feedback from my mentors was that my project lacked a clearly defined overarching vision. In response, I took time to write and reflect on what I truly wanted the project to achieve: to facilitate care and create commonality. This vision was then translated spatially into, for example, the gradual transition from public to private space within the residential floor plans, and the central role of the kitchen as a collective core of the site.

Another key point of feedback was about the role of food in the project. It was suggested that I could intensify the presence of food, by adding urban farms, rooftop gardens, or greenhouses. While I took this suggestion seriously

and reflected on it thoroughly, I ultimately decided not to include these elements. In my view, food should not be the goal, but a means of enabling social connection. Introducing food production risked turning a shared practice into a requirement, which could undermine the kitchen's role as an accessible space for gathering. This raised an important ethical question about the line between enabling and imposing care practices in design.

A more material-focused example of responding to feedback came through discussions about facade design. I had initially planned to use brick to harmonize with the neighborhood context, especially an Amsterdam School-style building nearby that I saw as a symbol of collective pride and commonality.

However, after feedback from my mentors and discussions with fellow students about sustainability and the future of surrounding buildings, I reconsidered this choice. In the final design, I chose wood as the primary facade material. This decision reduced the environmental impact of the project while also creating a clearer visual and conceptual connection to the community kitchen, which features a lighter, more open architectural language. The shift to wood reflects a broader value in my approach: to make material choices that balance contextual sensitivity with ecological responsibility.

### **Self-formulated Reflection Questions**

- *How do I develop a consistent design vision when research outcomes, personal intuition, and studio feedback do not always align?*

One of the most difficult aspects of

the design process was developing a consistent vision while navigating the often conflicting inputs of research outcomes, personal intuition, and studio feedback. My research pointed toward subtle, informal care practices. My intuition, shaped by previous knowledge and spatial sensibilities, led me toward design decisions that were meaningful but not always academically traceable. At the same time, feedback from mentors pushed me to clarify my intentions and justify them more explicitly.

Rather than aiming for full alignment between these inputs, I began to see the design vision as something that grew out of the back-and-forth between these different influences. Just like the central part of Di Bello's *Analisi e Sintesi*, the design process was not a straight line, but full of steps forward and backward, uncertainty, and constant adjustment. Accepting this mix of clarity and confusion became part of how I worked, and helped me shape a design vision that felt both thoughtful and responsive.

- *How does my design relate to the ethical responsibility of not imposing care, but instead enabling it to emerge?*

As briefly mentioned in the previous section on responding to feedback, I encountered a recurring tension between enabling care and prescribing it.

This tension helped clarify a core design value: architecture should create the conditions for care to emerge, rather than dictate how it should occur. This position reflects the ethical understanding of care as something relational and context-specific, rather than something



6

that can be predefined. Care arises through proximity, mutual recognition, and trust. These are qualities that architecture can support, but not guarantee.

This also led me to reflect on my role as a designer. Instead of shaping behavior through predetermined programs, I see my role as creating flexible spatial frameworks that allow people to shape their own interactions and practices.

### **Academic and Societal Value**

This project contributes to academic discussions on the spatial dimensions of care by demonstrating how architectural design can be informed by care ethics. Through participatory research and spatial analysis, I developed a methodology that foregrounds lived experience, interdependence, and emotional geographies as critical design inputs. In doing so, the work adds to a body of research that seeks to move beyond functionalist or purely programmatic understandings of space.

On a societal level, the project engages with the urgent pressures facing today's care systems, especially in the context of an aging population and fragmented communities. Rather than proposing new institutions, it explores how architecture can support informal, everyday acts of care through spatial strategies that foster local connection and mutual support.

### **Transferability of Results**

While the specific spatial configuration of the final design, a central square framed by residential and community buildings, was shaped by the unique physical and social conditions of Tarwewijk, the research approach and underlying design principles are transferable to other urban contexts. The concept of the

neighborhood kitchen, for example, as a typology that supports informal care and social connection, holds relevance beyond this site.

The methodology is also transferable is: a process of mapping care networks, engaging with communities through participatory research, and translating those insights into spatial strategies. This approach encourages designers to respond to the specific social and spatial dynamics of a place, rather than applying pre-formed solutions.

### **What I Learned from My Own Work**

#### *On the design process*

I learned that the design process is not about following a clear path from research to solution, but about navigating uncertainty, holding contradictions, and making space for the unexpected.

#### *On care and space*

This project taught me that designing for care is less about prescribing specific behaviors and more about creating spatial conditions that make care possible. Architecture can't produce care, but it can invite it, through openness, proximity, and attention to everyday needs.

#### *On my role as a designer*

Through this project, I came to understand my role not as someone who provides clear solutions, but as someone who listens, translates, and intervenes with care. Working with care as a central theme made me more aware of the ethical dimension of design and the responsibility that comes with shaping space. At the same time, I learned that research grounded in lived experience offers valuable insight, but that translating it into spatial form requires time and

iteration. The ambiguity I encountered in the process was not a limitation, but a necessary space for reflection, negotiation, and creativity.

7

### Refences

- Fondazione Donnaregina per le arti contemporanee.  
(n.d.). *Bruno Di Bello* [Photograph by Amedeo Benestante of *Analisi e Sintesi*, 1973]. Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donnaregina (MADRE). Retrieved May 5, 2025, from <https://www.madrenapoli.it/collezione/bruno-di-bello/>
- Tuana, N. (2017). Feminist Epistemology: The subject of knowledge. In I. J. Kidd, J. Medina, & G. Pohlhaus (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*. Routledge.

