

Rest in Peace?

the death and life of
urban cemeteries

P5 Presentation
Nikita Ham
15 January 2026

death?!

Death?!



▲ Dirk Jan Buter (45) from Zwolle. © Rob Voss

Dirk Jan wants to be frozen in America to live forever: 'Why not?'

Jasper van Loo, Jordy Boschman

January 26, 2025, 11:30 AM • Last update: January 26, 2025, 1:25 PM

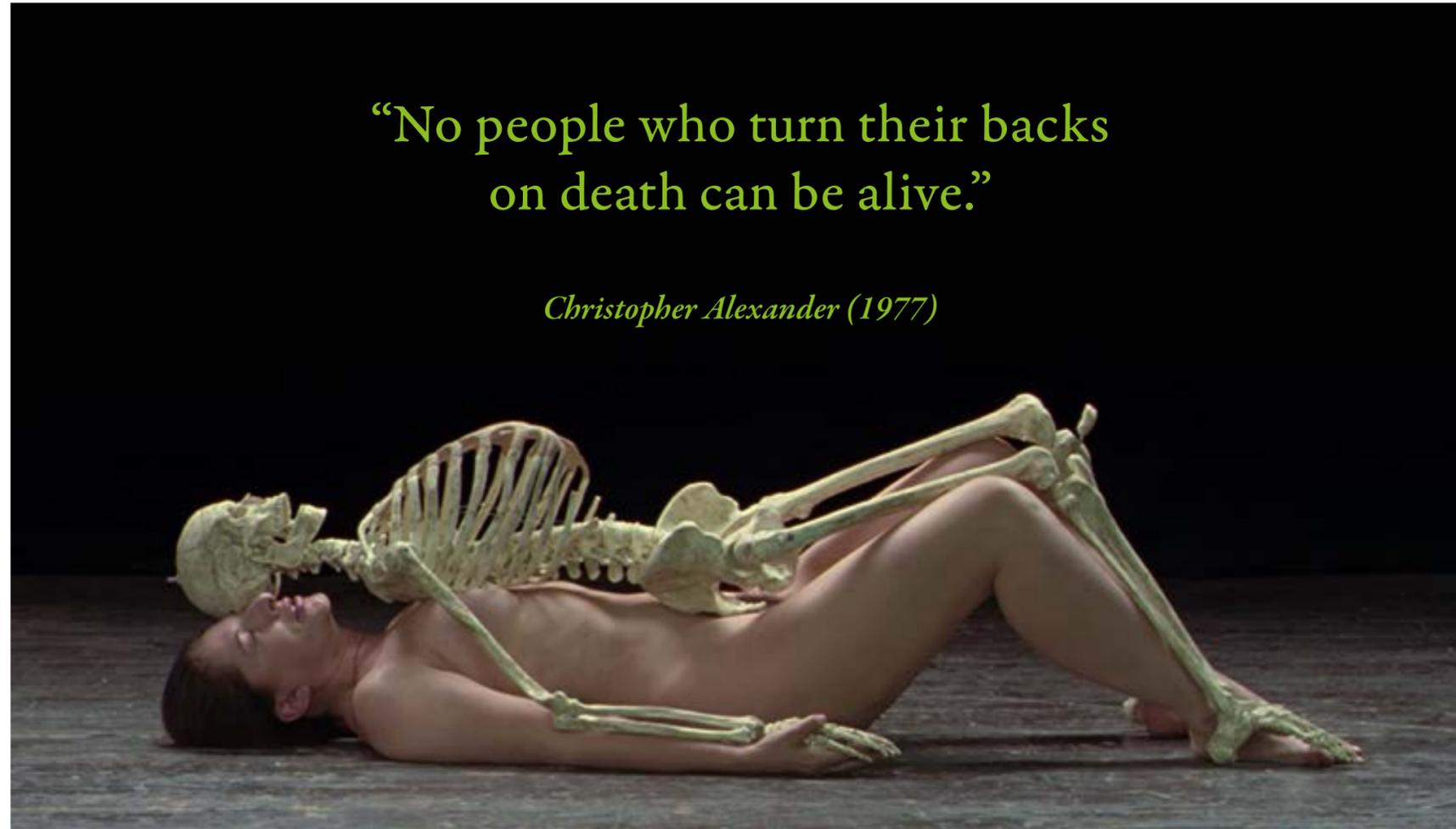
Denial of Death, Ernest Becker (1973)

Van Loo & Boschman (2025, January 26. Dirk Jan wants to be frozen in America to live forever: 'Why not?' AD. <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/dirk-jan-wil-zich-in-amerika-laten-invriezen-om-eeuwig-te-leven-waarom-niet~a4013440/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>

motivation

“No people who turn their backs
on death can be alive.”

Christopher Alexander (1977)



Marina Abramovic performs *Nude with Skeleton*, 2005.
[photo: Stedelijk Amsterdam]

Research aim:

**to make places connected to death
part of daily life again,**

**focusing on reconnecting urban cemeteries
to the urban fabric,**

**by designing spatial interventions
in Rotterdam-South**

the cemetery



Zuiderbegraafplaats, Rotterdam



Assistens, Copenhagen



Highgate, London



Crooswijk, Rotterdam



St Laurentius, Rotterdam

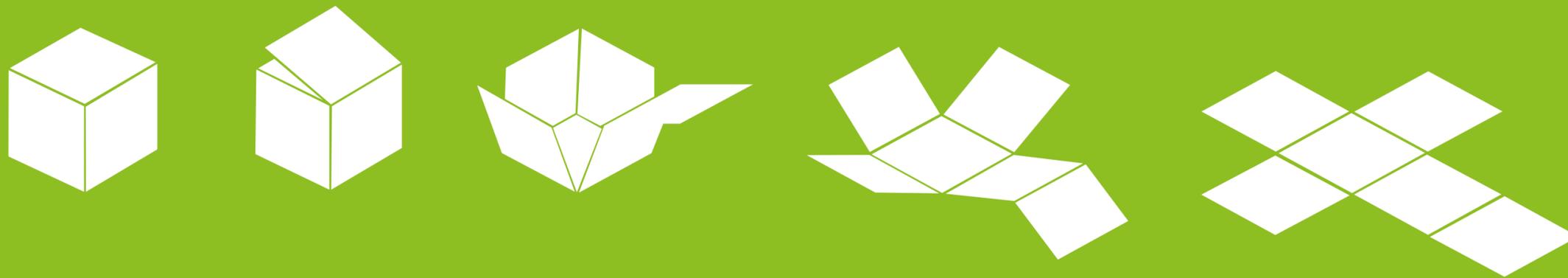


St Jacobi, Berlin

Some people don't even dare to walk through the entrance!

- person working at Museum Tot Zover (Nieuwe Ooster, Amsterdam)

unfolding the cemetery



evolution of the cemetery



1000-1800
cemetery = heart of the town
social function



Cimetière des Innocents, Paris (ca. 1550)

Painting: Musée Carnavalet/Théodore Hoffbauer
<https://www.parisunlocked.com/best-of-paris/top-paris-attractions/touring-catacombs-of-paris-history-facts/>

evolution of the cemetery



1827

royal decree that forbids cemeteries in
the city centre for hygienic reasons

evolution of the cemetery

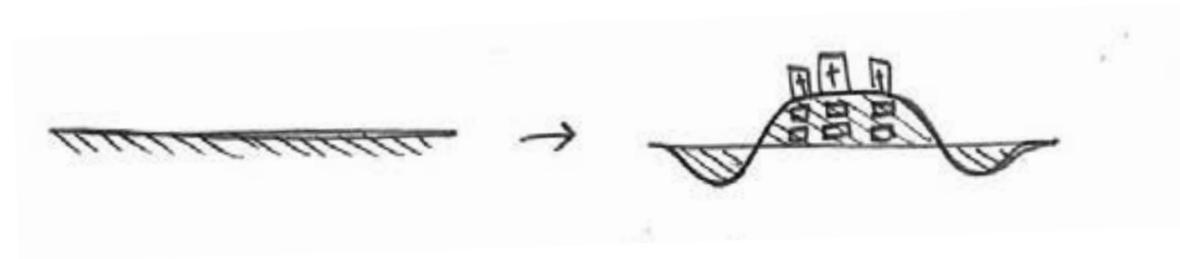


NOW

densification -> pressure on public space
but cemetery stays introverted

problematization: spatial

boundaries explained

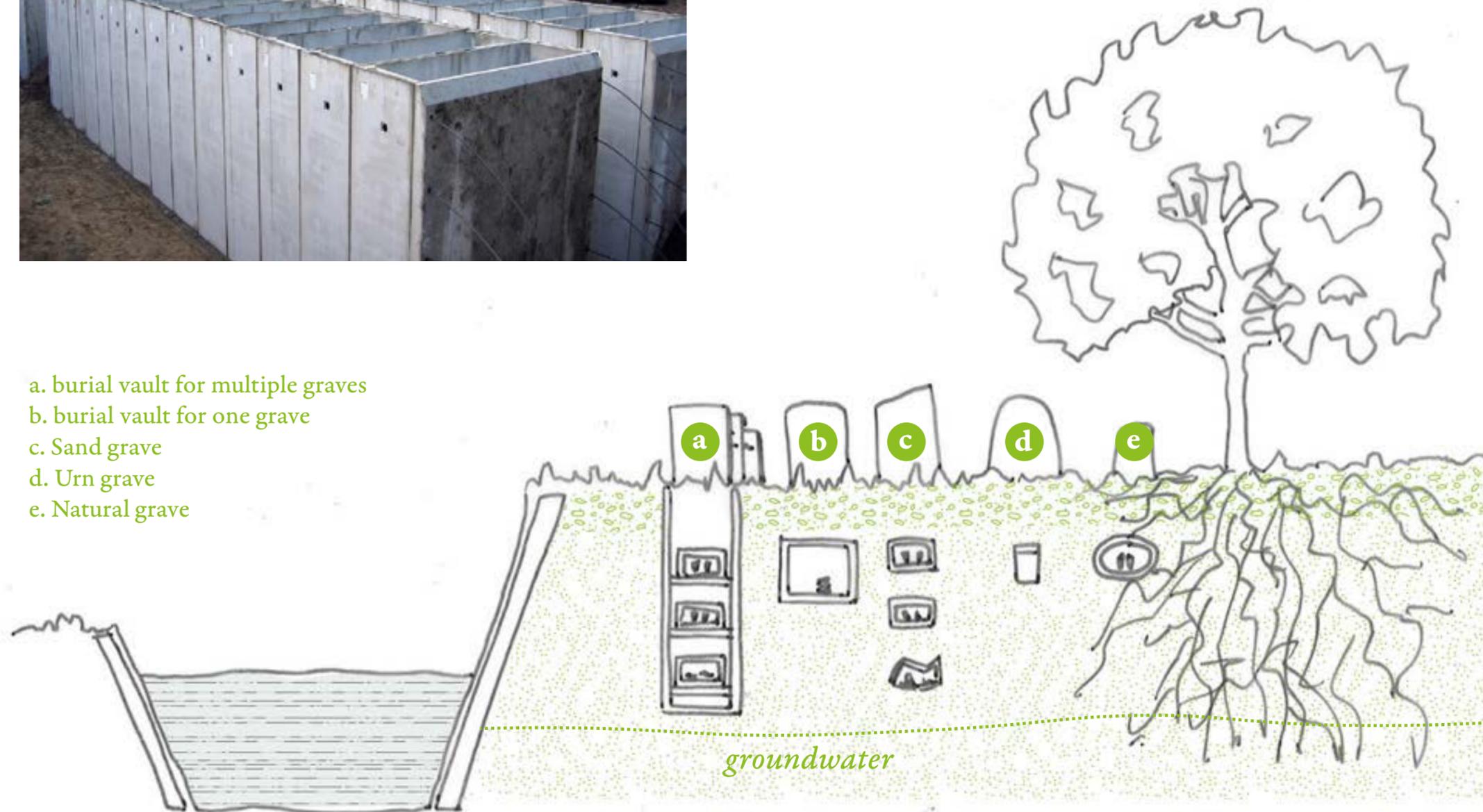


Canal and heightened cemetery, Jaffa cemetery in Delft

technical analysis

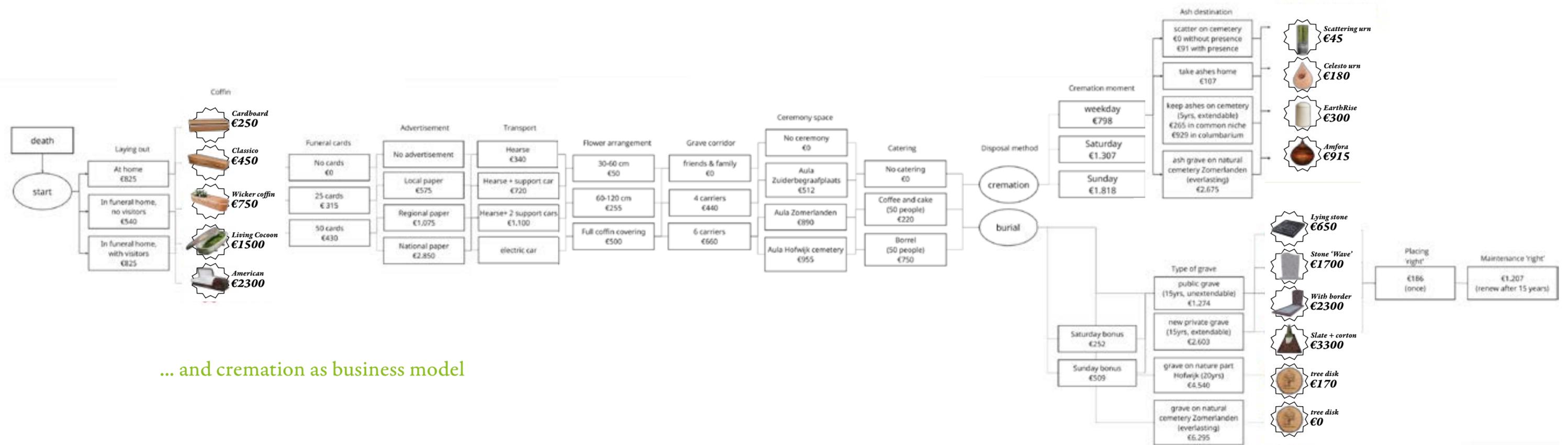


- a. burial vault for multiple graves
- b. burial vault for one grave
- c. Sand grave
- d. Urn grave
- e. Natural grave



Burial vaults construction on The Nieuwe Ooster, Amsterdam.
Project by Karres en Brands. Photo by Jeroen Musch (2006)
Image made by author

problematization: social



... and cremation as business model

Adaptation from J.J. 's The Flow: the visual lifecycle of death. (2023, page 8).
Visual made by author

problematization: environmental



Empty sections at Zuiderbegraafplaats,
Rotterdam

"When the cemetery does not generate enough income to cover the costs, we simply do less [maintenance]."

- Ton van Dam,
asset manager Zuiderbegraafplaats

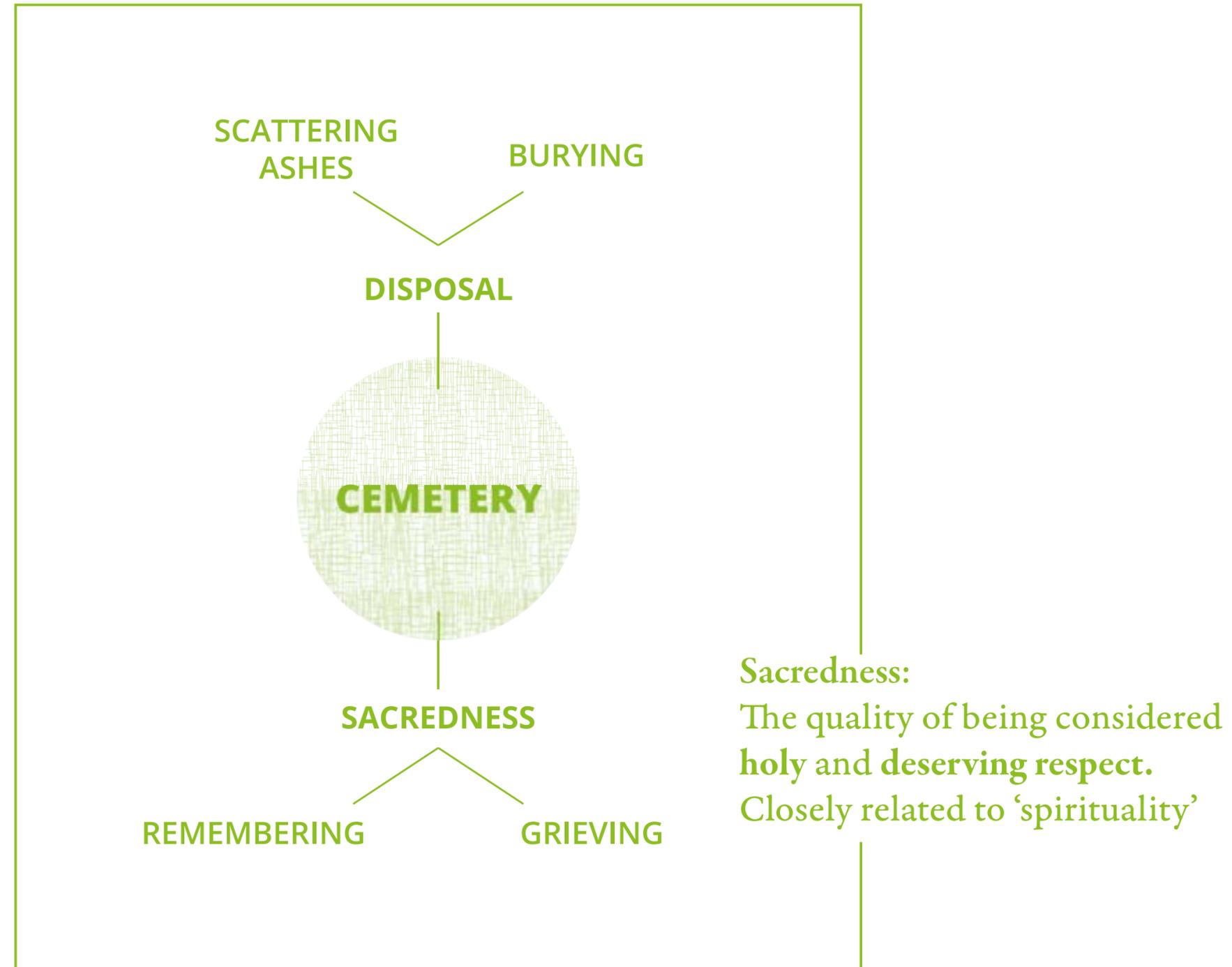
problem statement

In cities, death has become increasingly removed from everyday life. Cemeteries are often spatially and socially separated, limiting opportunities for collective remembrance and reflection. At the same time, urban space is under pressure to serve multiple functions. This raises the question of **how cemeteries can be reimagined as integrated, accessible places that reconnect death with daily life while supporting social, cultural, and ecological values.**



A small group picnics on ledger-style tombstones in Historic St. Luke's Ancient Cemetery (1957)
Courtesy Historic St. Luke's

defining



the three phases of the Dutch death ritual

1. funeral ceremony

2. disposal practices

3. period of bereavement

[Mathijssen, 2017]



ceremony location becoming more informal and personal

Mathijssen, B. (2017). Making sense of death: ritual practices and situational beliefs of the recently bereaved in the Netherlands (Vol. 5). LIT Verlag Münster.

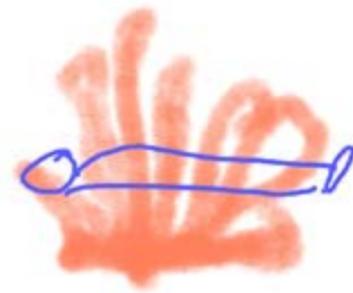
Reference: forest chapel Schapenmeer Schapenmeer (n.d.).
<https://www.natuurbegraafplaatschapenmeer.nl/uitvaart/afscheidsceremonie/>

the three phases of the Dutch death ritual

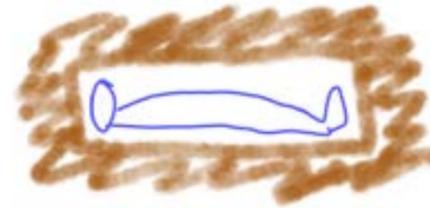
1. funeral ceremony

2. disposal practices

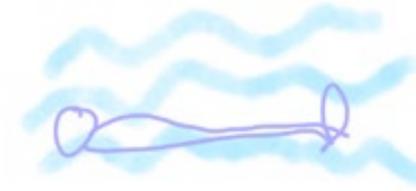
3. period of bereavement



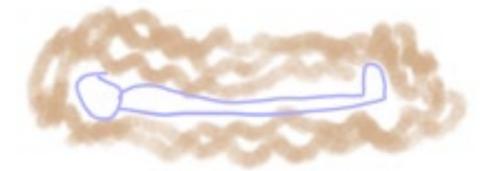
cremation



(natural) burial



resomation



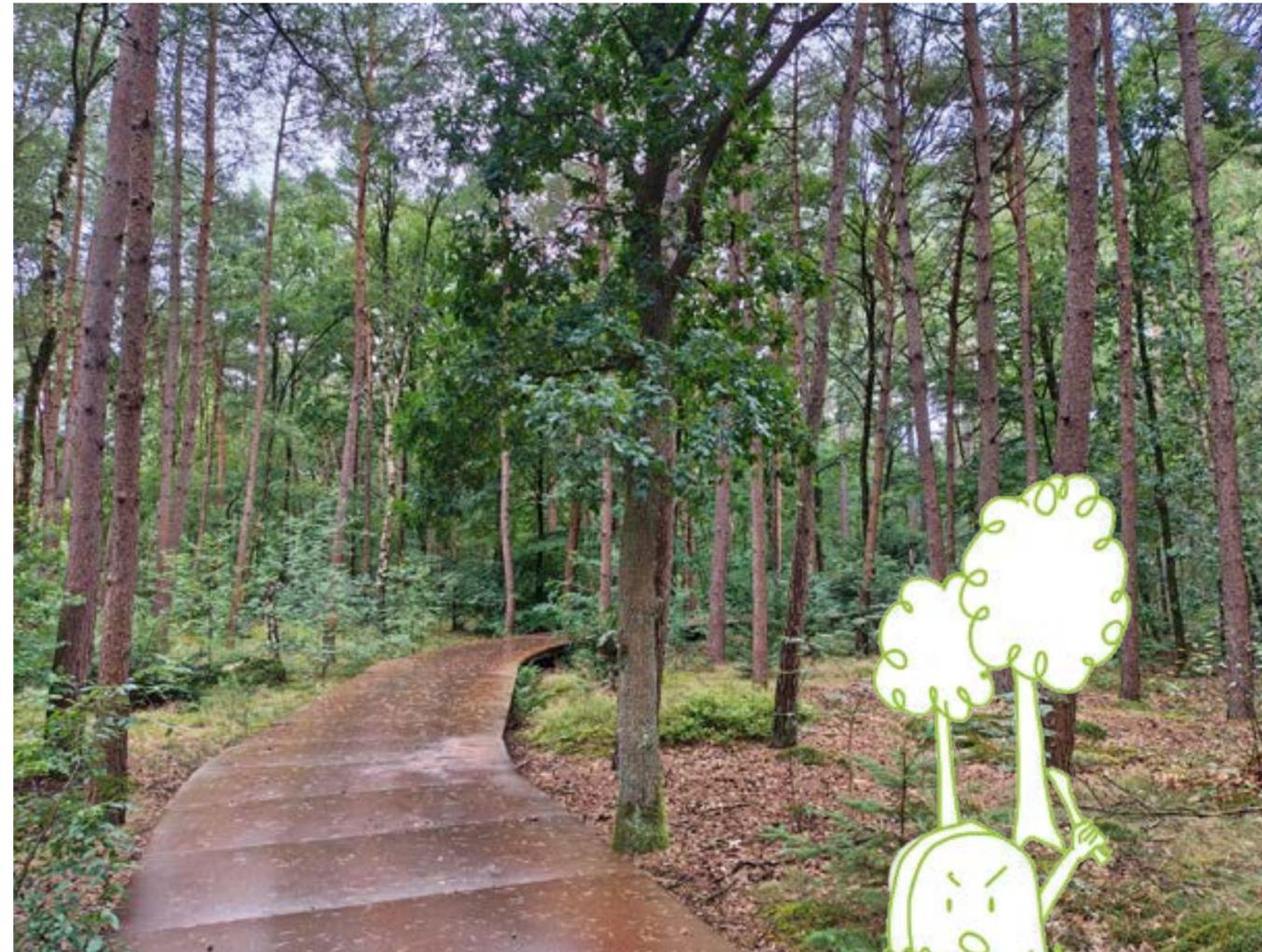
human composting

[Mathijssen, 2017]

sustainable burial gaining popularity



Volkskrant, 02-12-2025



Den en Rust natural cemetery, Bilthoven

PROTECT!

sustainable burial room for improvement

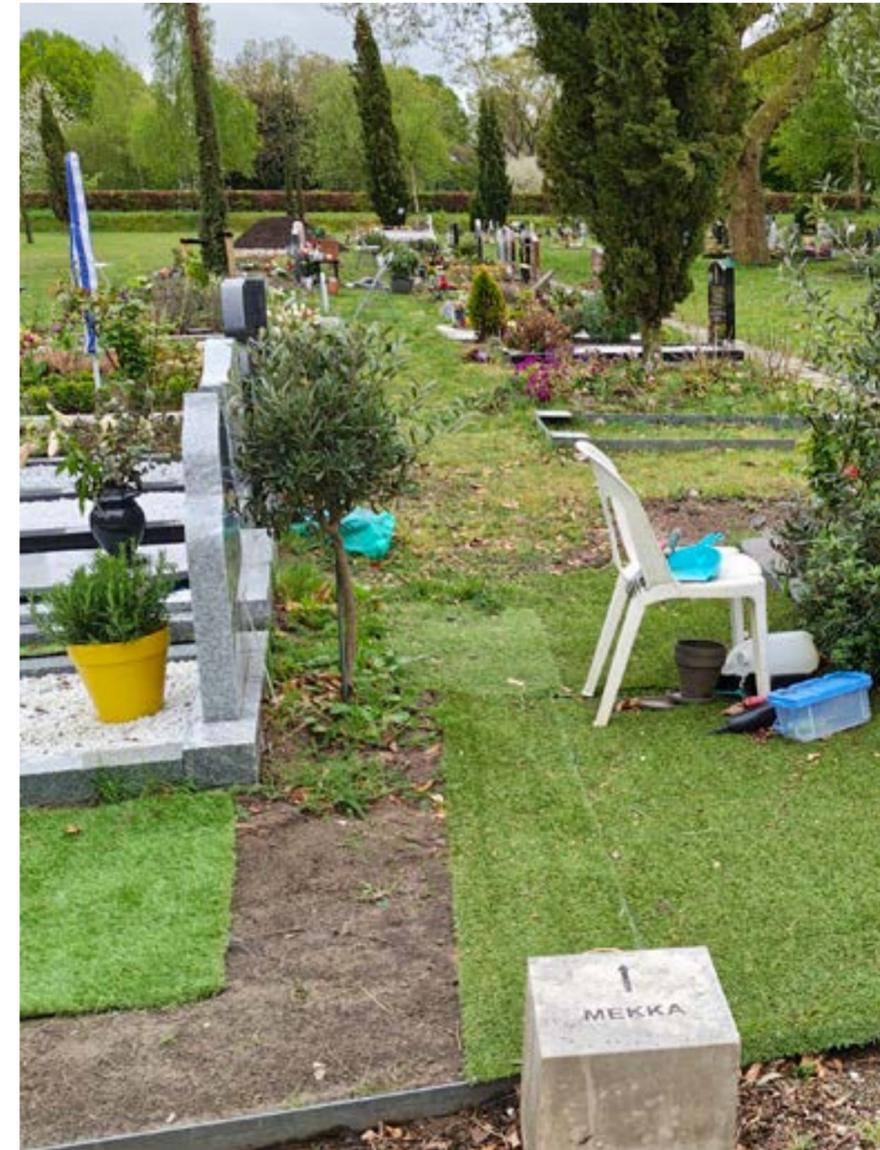
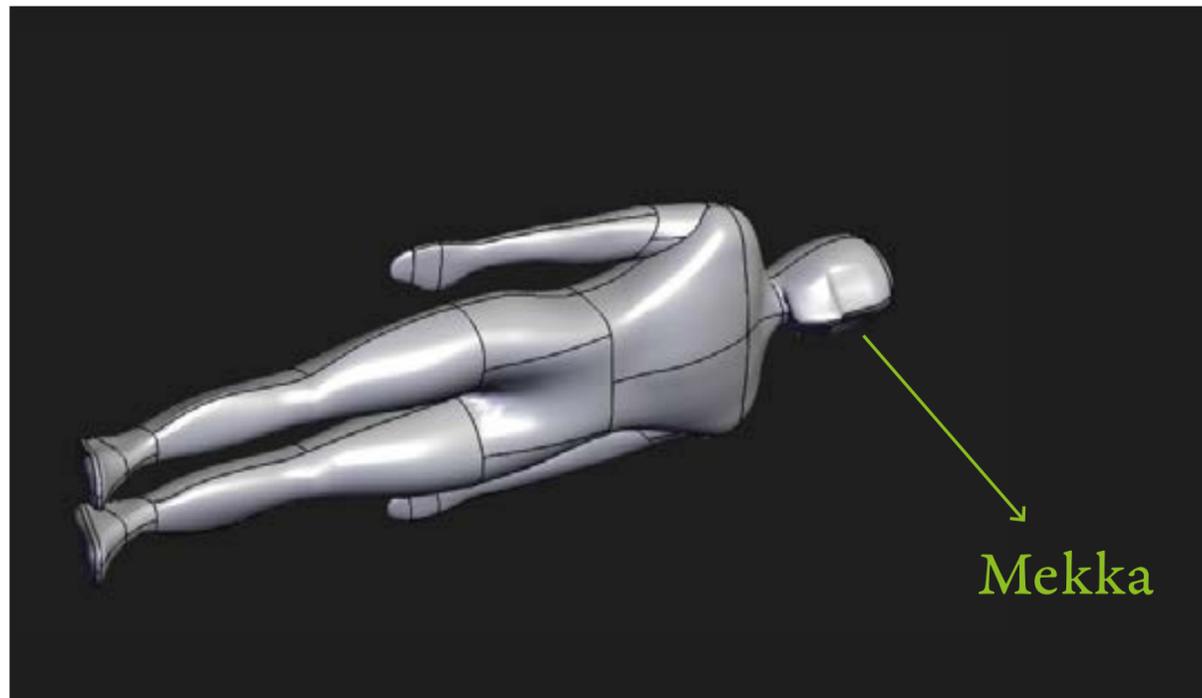


Den en Rust natural cemetery, Bilthoven

Putting flowers is not allowed on a natural cemetery, so when I visit I take some pine cones or make a heart with twigs"

- grieving peer
[informal conversation]

Islamic burial customs



Islamic part at Nieuwe Ooster,
Amsterdam

the three phases of the Dutch death ritual

1. funeral ceremony

2. disposal practices

3. period of bereavement

[Mathijssen, 2017]



1. Taking necessary tools from home



2. Buying flowers in the supermarket



3. Storing the flowers in the bicycle bag



4. The road to the cemetery, by bike



5. Parking the bike upon arrival at the cemetery



6. Entering the cemetery through the gates



7. Walking to the grave, taking off hot clothing items



8. Filling the watering can at the tap



9. Removing unattractive weeds



10. Planting the flowers that were brought along



11. Cleaning the grave from sand and dust



12. Watering the plants



13. The final result



14. Throwing away the plastic plant pots



15. Cleaning the hands from dirt



16. Standing still at the bone pit, where family members also lie

the three phases of the Dutch death ritual

1. funeral ceremony

2. disposal practices

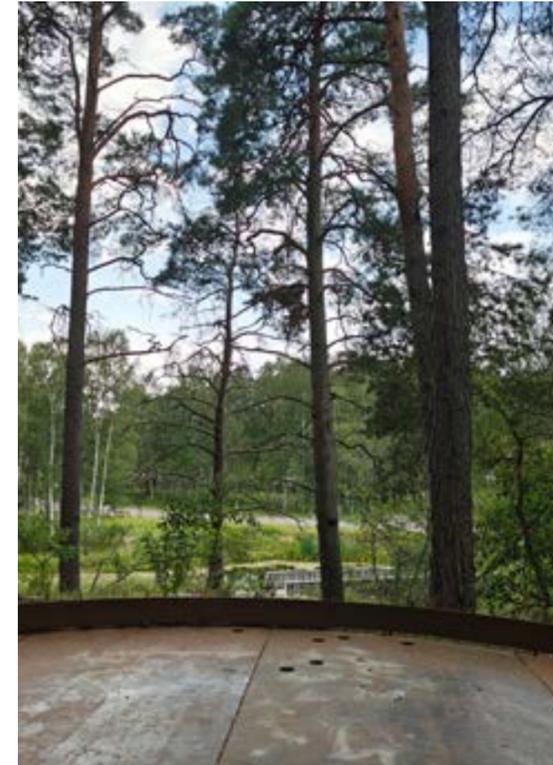
3. period of bereavement

[Mathijssen, 2017]



grave care

*Skogskyrkogården,
Stockholm*



reflection

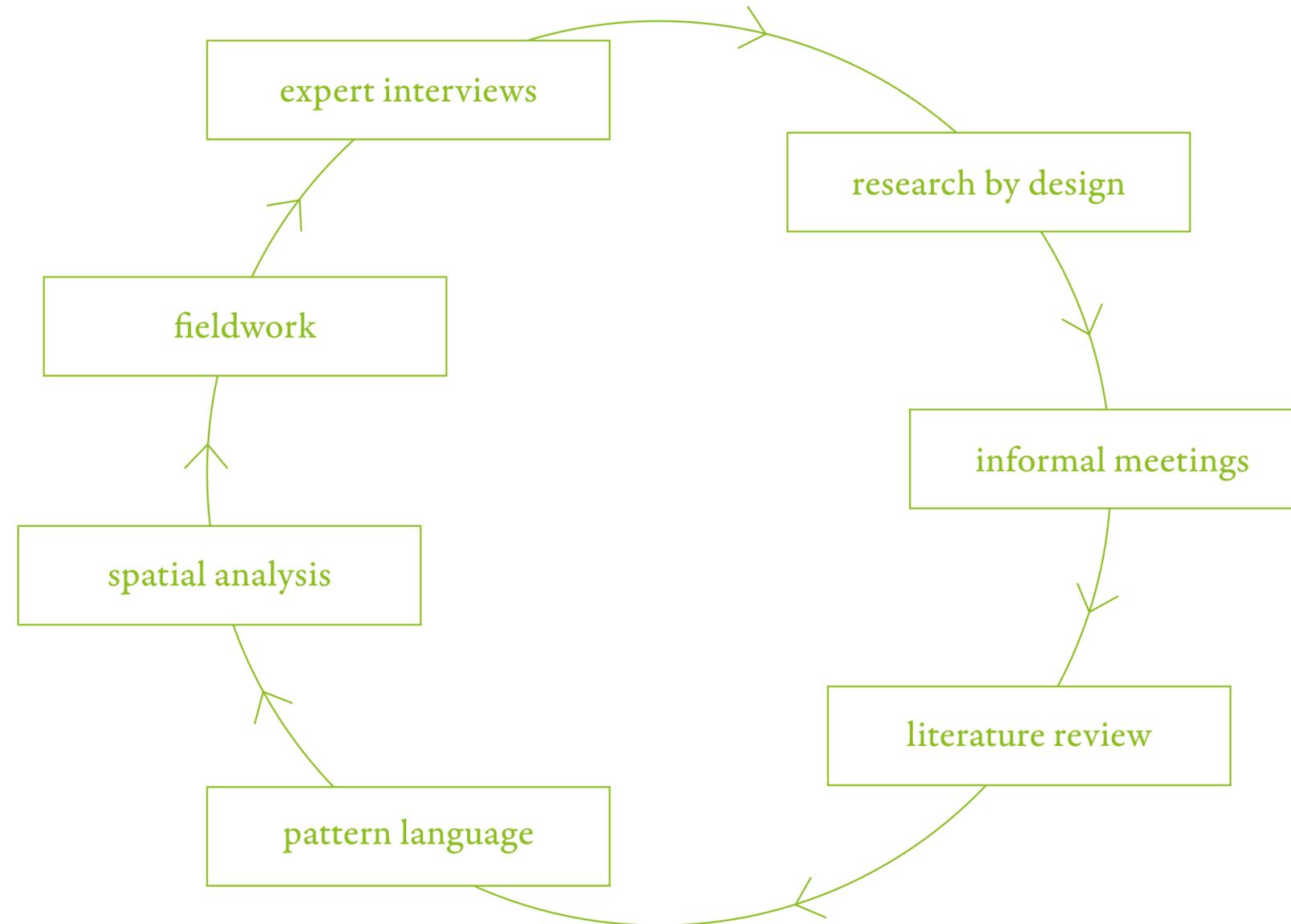
*Järva cemetery,
Stockholm*



come together

*Meža kapī,
Riga*

methodology



fieldwork



fieldwork_NL

Ceemeterij Crooswijk, Rotterdam
St Laurentius, Rotterdam
Nieuwe Ooster, Amsterdam
Bosdrift, Hilversum
Zomerlanden, Hoeksche Waard
Zuiderbegraafplaats, Rotterdam



fieldwork_abroad

Highgate, London
St Jacobi, Berlin
Järva, Stockholm
Skogskyrkogården, Stockholm
Assistens, Copenhagen

fieldwork abroad



Norra begravningsplats, Stockholm



Assistens kirkegard, Copenhagen

multi-functionality



tourist tours,
cafe



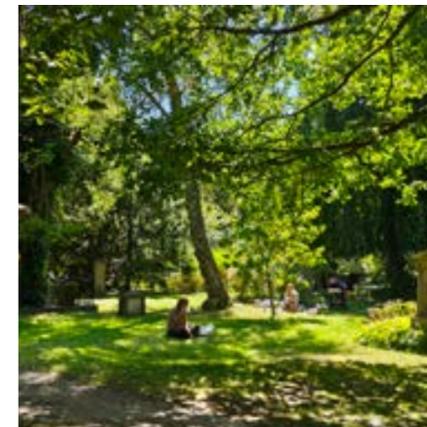
beer garden



nature reserve



community garden



city park

conceptual framework



strategy

	ENVIRONMENTAL	SOCIAL	SPATIAL
	<i>Biodiversity</i>	<i>Multi-functionality</i>	<i>Connectivity</i>
	<i>Urban greening</i>	<i>Un-smoothing</i>	<i>Proximity</i>

life in the cemetery



strategy

	ENVIRONMENTAL	SOCIAL	SPATIAL
	<i>Biodiversity</i>	<i>Multi-functionality</i>	<i>Connectivity</i>
	<i>Urban greening</i>	<i>Un-smoothing</i>	<i>Proximity</i>

A photograph of a cemetery. In the foreground, a well-manicured green hedge runs across the bottom. Behind it, a person in a white shirt and dark shorts stands among numerous graves, some of which are adorned with flowers. The graves are set on a light-colored gravel or brick path. The background is filled with lush green trees under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and well-maintained.

design location 1
Zuiderbegraafplaats

current situation



history Zuiderbegraafplaats

design steps

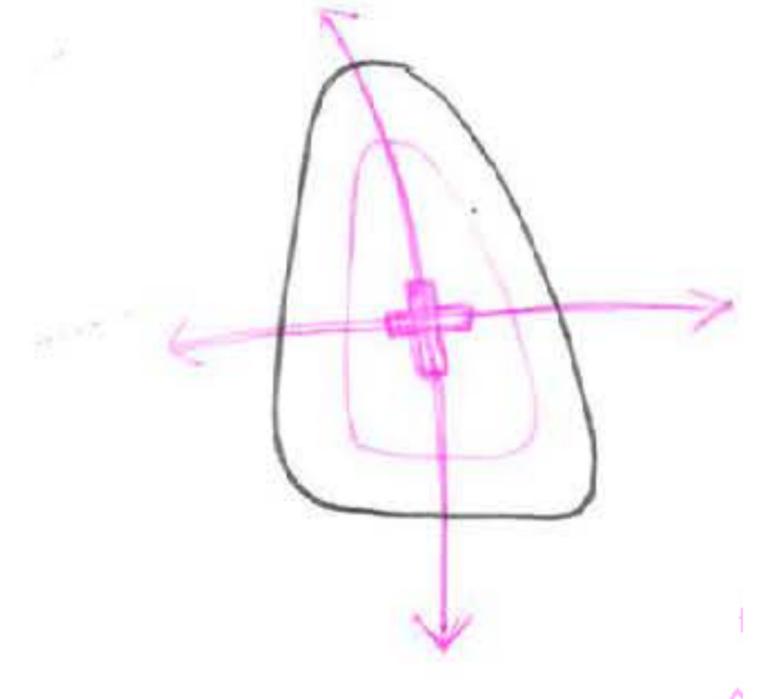
1. Meaningful connections



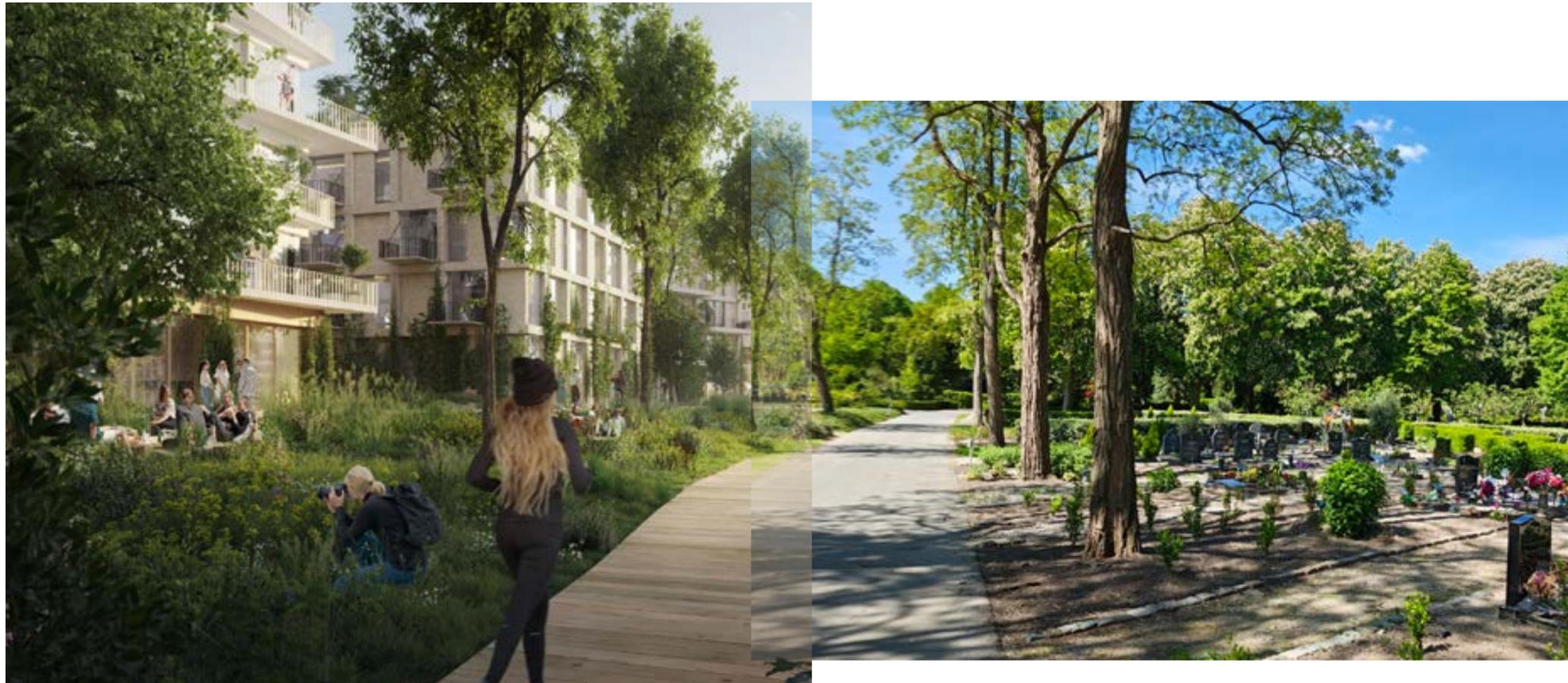
1940



2007



surroundings



design steps

1. Meaningful connections
2. Integration surroundings



preservation



- common graves (15 years)
- Islamic graves (eternal)
- private graves (extendable)

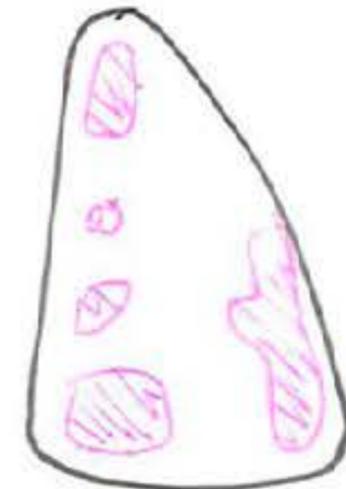
Feyenoord section



Chinese section

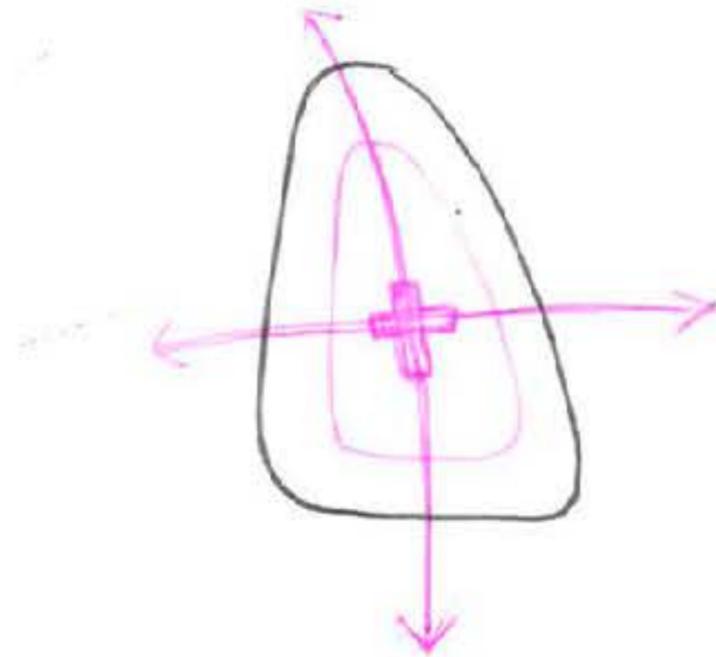
design steps

1. Meaningful connections
2. Integration surroundings
3. Preservation



design steps

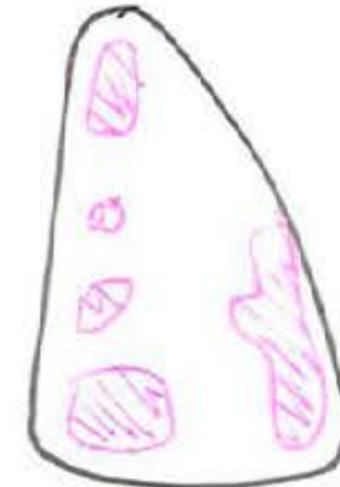
1. Meaningful connections



2. Integration surroundings



3. Preservation



transforming Zuiderbegraafplaats



Legend

-  building
-  active square
-  main network
-  sub network
-  cemetery preservation
-  biodiversity-rich area
-  outdoor area for lease
-  water
-  driveway

⊙ drawn 1:2.000

26 *Lease in peace*



Leasing unused cemetery areas to community groups to strengthen local connections.

scale: S (M) L goals: b m c g u p emotions: ⊖ ⊕ ⊗

35 patterns

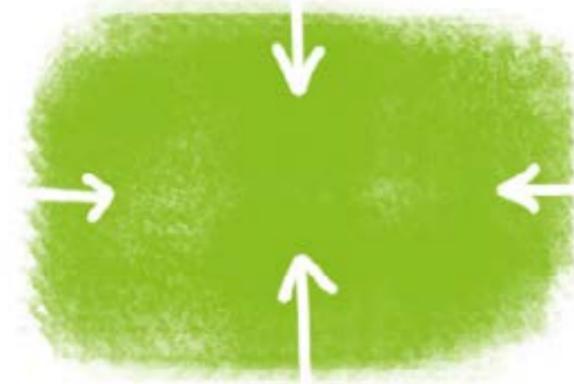
and can be expanded!

<p>01 <i>Connected cemeteries</i></p>  <p>A network of cemeteries can form a walkable landscape of remembrance.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>02 <i>Transition zone</i></p>  <p>Designing thresholds for transition, not for seclusion.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>05 <i>Peek-a-boo</i></p>  <p>Opening the cemetery border to offer a peek into the place reduces the mystery.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>06 <i>Stairway to heaven</i></p>  <p>Introducing subtle changes in elevation within a flat landscape to add spatial variety and create look-out points.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>09 <i>Sustainable disposition</i></p>  <p>Promoting and regulating sustainable burial practices, to reduce environmental harm.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>10 <i>Wildlife meets afterlife</i></p>  <p>Cemeteries can serve as vital green refuges that support wildlife.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>13 <i>Acts of remembrance</i></p>  <p>Rethinking how remembrance is expressed, to offer meaningful alternatives to traditional grave decorations.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>14 <i>Place to stay</i></p>  <p>Being able to sit down and take a moment, wherever you need it.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>
<p>03 <i>No dead-ends</i></p>  <p>The cemetery as part of the daily commute, stroll or run by cut-through routes.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>04 <i>Gentle grave stones</i></p>  <p>Subtle grave markers to maintain a harmonious, park-like character in the cemetery.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>07 <i>Symbolic planting</i></p>  <p>Thoughtful plant selection enriches a cemetery's meaning and image.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>08 <i>From lawn to meadow</i></p>  <p>Transforming underused cemetery lawns into diverse planted landscapes for biodiversity.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>11 <i>Stone cold</i></p>  <p>The cemetery as place to cool down during hot Summer days.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>12 <i>Water buffer</i></p>  <p>Storing water on-site in urban small-scale cemeteries.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>15 <i>A meal on the cemetery</i></p>  <p>Places for having a meal as a vital medium through which grief, memory, and connection are expressed.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>16 <i>Sheltered</i></p>  <p>Care for cemetery visitors by providing shelter for extreme weather scenarios.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>
<p>17 <i>Dead silent</i></p>  <p>Balancing public areas with private refuge allows cemeteries to support many forms of grief.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>18 <i>Outdoor ceremony</i></p>  <p>Open air ceremonies as alternative to traditional indoor spaces, embedded in the surroundings.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>21 <i>Food production</i></p>  <p>Edible planting transforms cemeteries into places that nourish both memory and community.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>22 <i>Cemetery café</i></p>  <p>A café as informal place to stay and have a drink on the cemetery.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>25 <i>Learning ground</i></p>  <p>By hosting educational programs, the cemetery becomes a space to share knowledge.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>26 <i>Lease in peace</i></p>  <p>Leasing unused cemetery areas to community groups to strengthen local connections.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>29 <i>Floating urns</i></p>  <p>A floating urn pond offers a dynamic alternative to traditional ash storage.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>30 <i>Memorial lights</i></p>  <p>Human composting transforms death into a visible, regenerative process that produces energy to fuel lights.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>
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<p>19 <i>Someone to talk to</i></p>  <p>Spaces for conversation and shared reflection, cemeteries can take on a meaningful social role within the city.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>20 <i>Voluntary stewardship</i></p>  <p>Actively involving volunteers in both the care and programming of a cemetery strengthens its community role.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>23 <i>Every body has a story</i></p>  <p>Every life has a story worth telling. The cemetery can be a library of lives.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>24 <i>Child-friendly</i></p>  <p>Introducing cemeteries to children through gentle, playful elements.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>27 <i>Public toilet</i></p>  <p>Integrating public toilets acknowledges the cemetery as a place of care and everyday use.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>28 <i>Scattered graves</i></p>  <p>Breaking down the scale of the cemetery to spread through the city.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>31 <i>Lifecycle</i></p>  <p>Human composting reframes death as a contribution to the greening the city.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>	<p>32 <i>Parklet grave</i></p>  <p>Turning a parklet into a temporary grave allows mourners to keep the deceased close.</p> <p>scale: S M L goals: b n c p emotions: + -</p>
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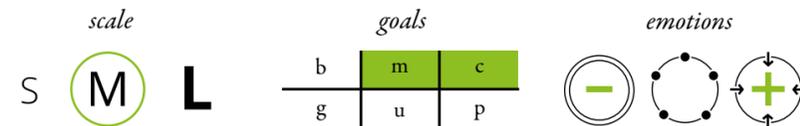
pattern example

03

No dead-ends



The cemetery as part of the daily commute, stroll or run by cut-through routes.



ACTION

Multiple entrances make it easier to add a cemetery to a daily stroll or longer hike, attracting more people to the place. Make the entrances on meaningful connections with the urban fabric.

BACK-UP

Assistens Copenhagen, Skogskyrkogården Stockholm, interview Sander Klaassen (appendix A5)

RESPONSIBILITY

municipality / management / residents / bereaved

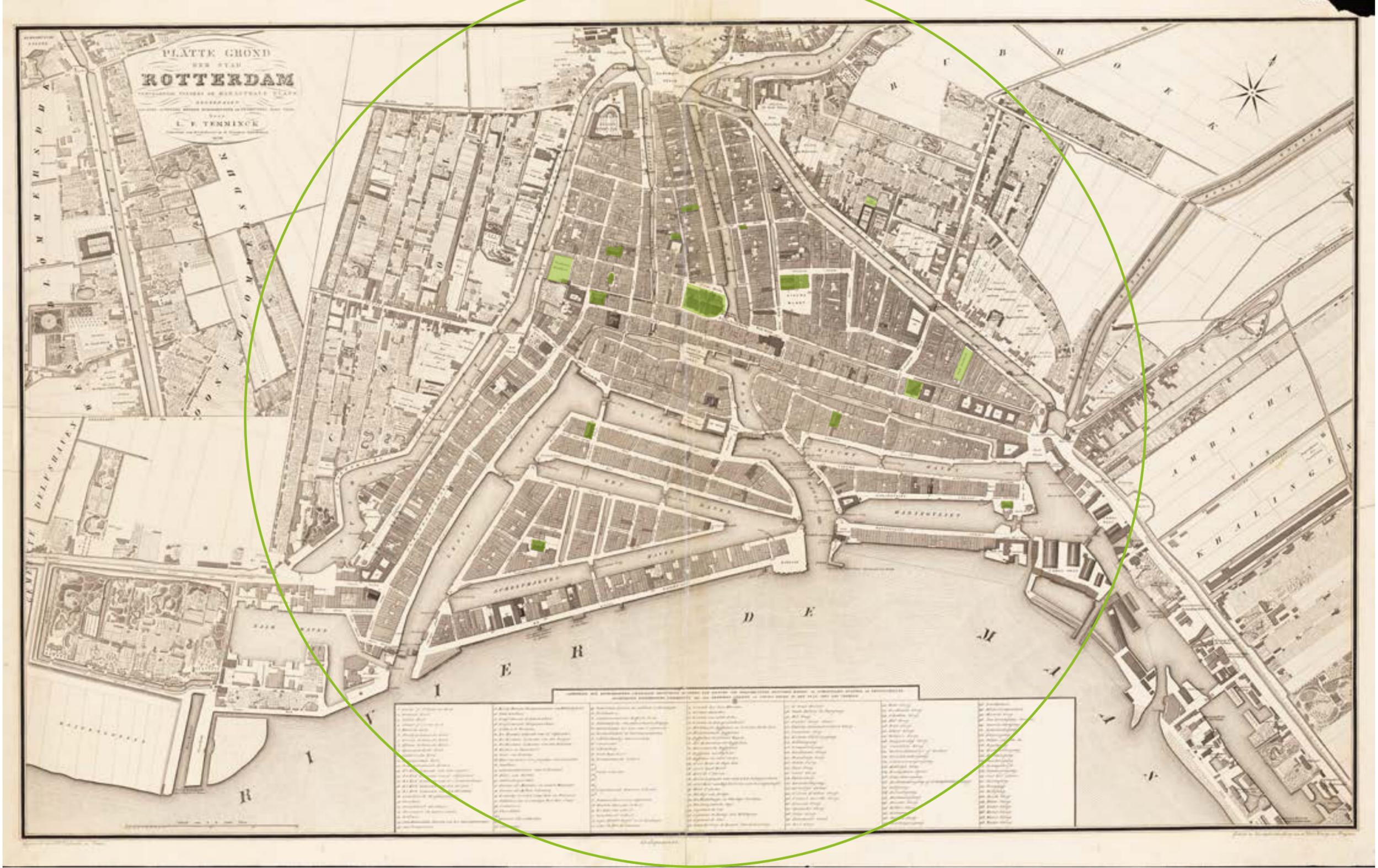
SUPPORTS

01 Connected cemeteries

death in the city



Map of Rotterdam, by Veelwaard en Zn., D./ L.F. Temminck (1839).
Retrieved from the city archive of Rotterdam





strategy

	ENVIRONMENTAL	SOCIAL	SPATIAL
	<i>Biodiversity</i>	<i>Multi-functionality</i>	<i>Connectivity</i>
	<i>Urban greening</i>	<i>Un-smoothing</i>	<i>Proximity</i>



"As the smooth city sets out to eradicate these 'imperfections' and irregularities, it leaves no space and time to live life properly." René Boer, pg 149

proximity extreme

32

Parklet grave



Turning a parklet into a temporary grave allows mourners to keep the deceased close.

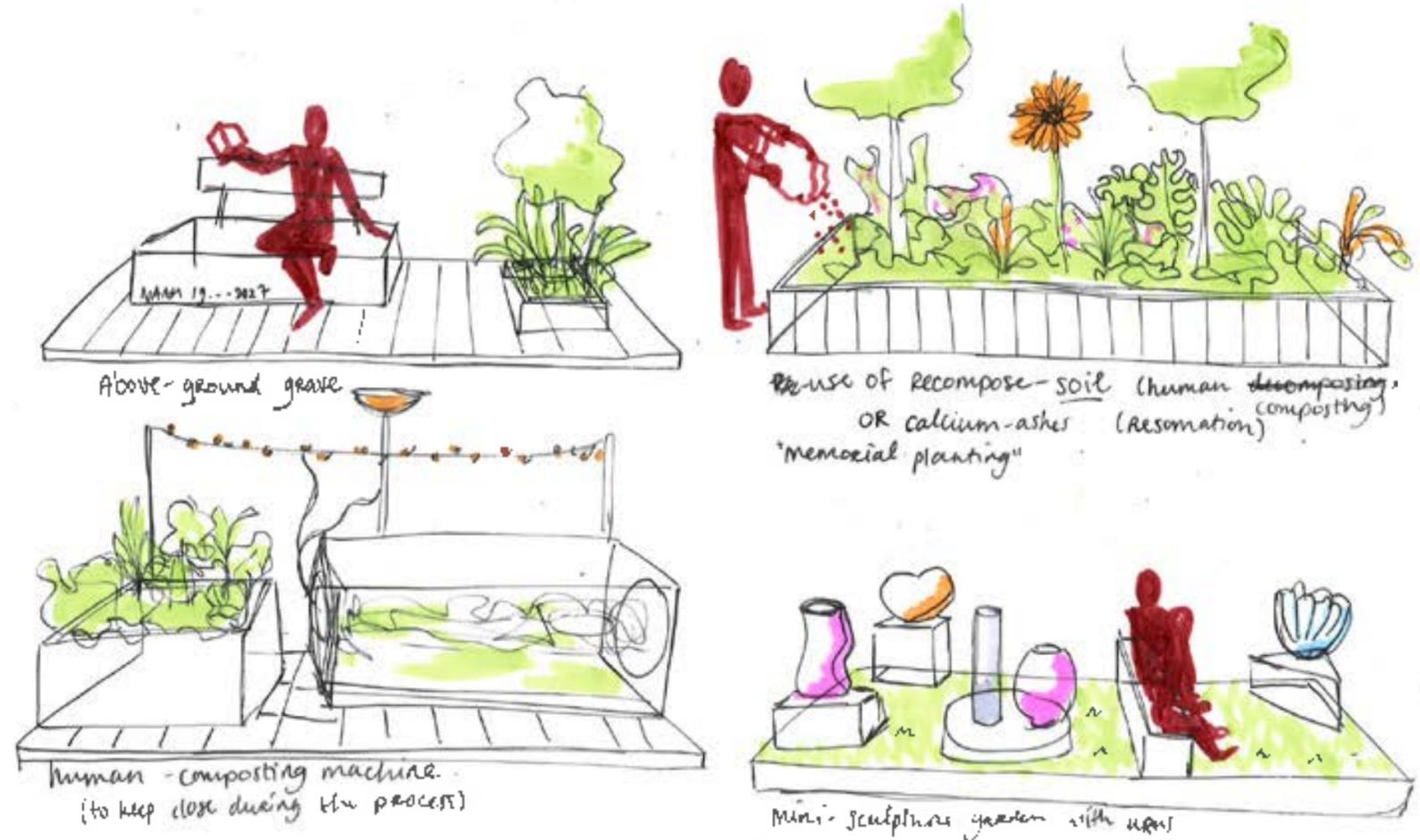
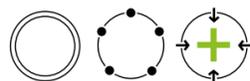
scale

S M L

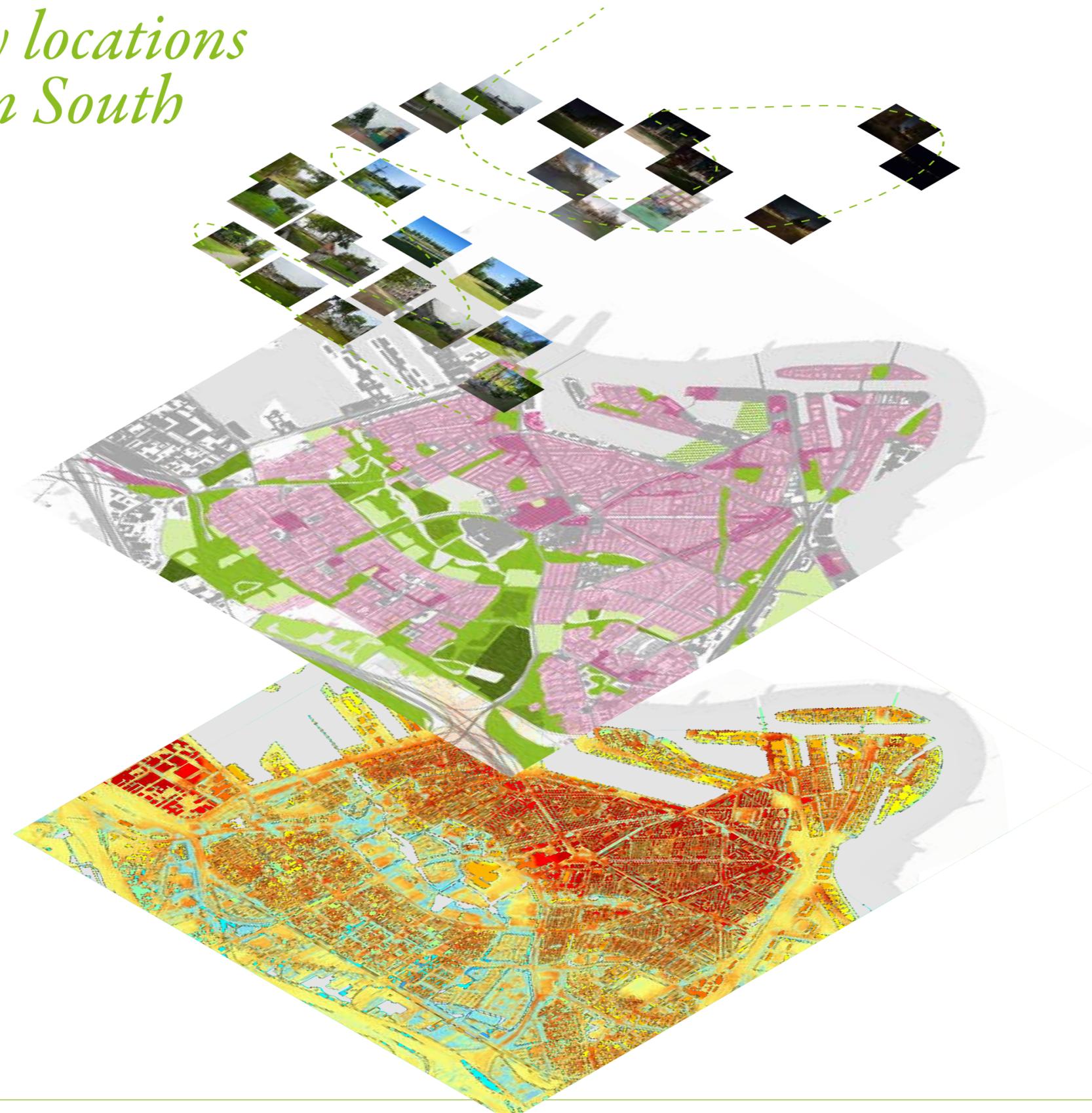
goals

b	m	c
g	u	p

emotions



new cemetery locations in Rotterdam South



Fieldwork

Paving, functions and green

- paving
- residential area
- public area
- cemetery
- allotment gardens
- park
- planned park
- recreational area
- sports field
- water

UHI-effect (°C)

- < 0,2
- 0,2 - 0,4
- 0,4 - 0,6
- 0,6 - 0,8
- 0,8 - 1,0
- 1,0 - 1,2
- 1,2 - 1,4
- 1,4 - 1,6
- 1,6 - 1,8
- 1,8 - 2,0
- ≥2

data: CBS, RIVM &
Provincie Zuid-Holland

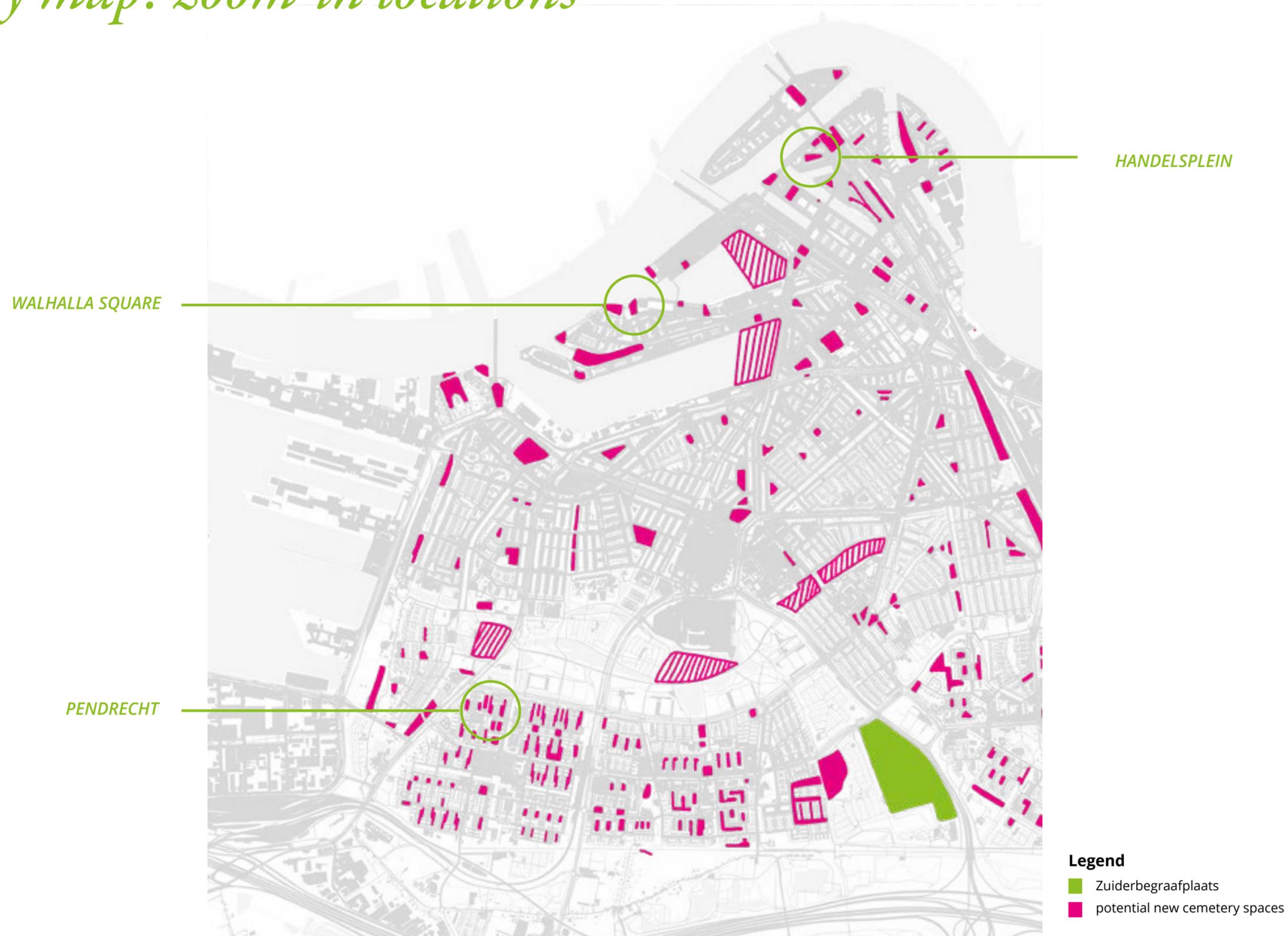
opportunity map



Legend

- Zuiderbegraafplaats
- potential new cemetery spaces

opportunity map: zoom-in locations

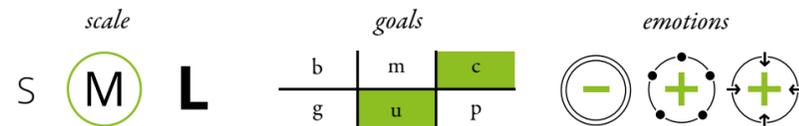


30

Memorial lights



Human composting transforms death into a visible, regenerative process that produces energy to fuel lights.



ACTION

Human composting offers a new and sustainable form of body disposition, in which the anaerobic process produces organic fertilizer and energy. A concept from Columbia University's DeathLAB, the energy is used to fuel a memorial light (Upmeyer, 2019). This makes the disposal process visible and can be used to light up and give meaning to public space.

'Especially in today's fractured world, we need reminders of our intertwined lives and our shared obligation, not only to one another, but to the future of the planet.'

– Karla Rothstein

BACK-UP

> Rothstein & Staudt (2021)

RESPONSIBILITY

municipality / management / residents / bereaved

SUPPORTS

09 Sustainable disposition



Sylvan Constellation, DeathLAB, Columbia University

DeathLAB (2021b). Sylvan Constellation. Columbia University
<https://deathlab.org/sylvan-constellation/>

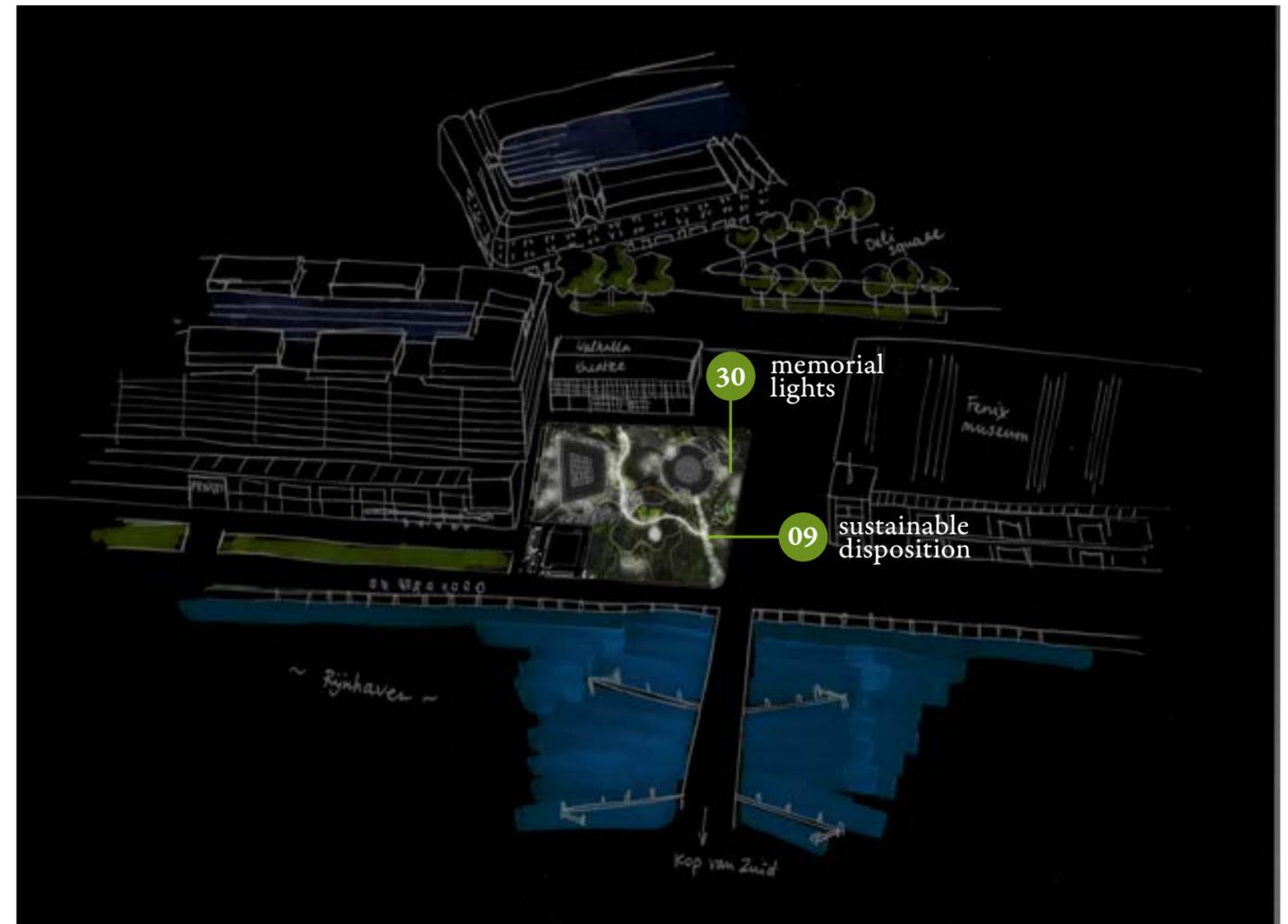
Walhalla square

focus: un-smoothing





Projection of Novo Nordisk Nature Park during daytime



Projection of Novo Nordisk Nature Park during nighttime

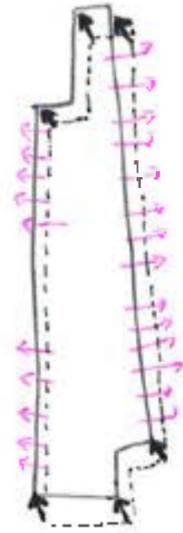
Reference: Novo Nordisk Nature Park by SLA
<https://www.sla.dk/cases/novo-nordisk-nature-park/>

Pendrecht courtyard

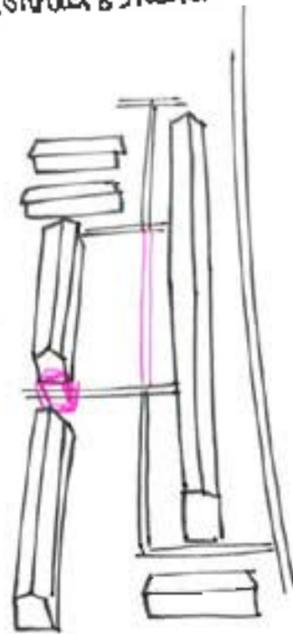
focus: proximity



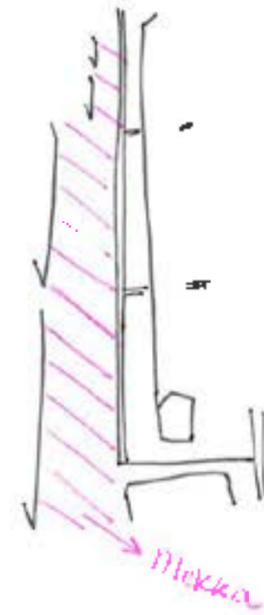
Raise ground level
to add entrances



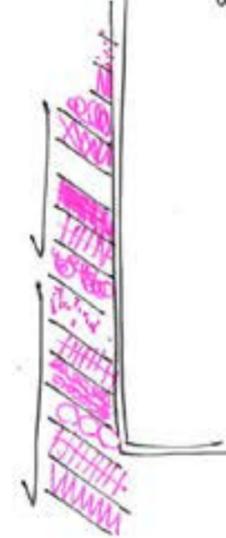
connect & shelter

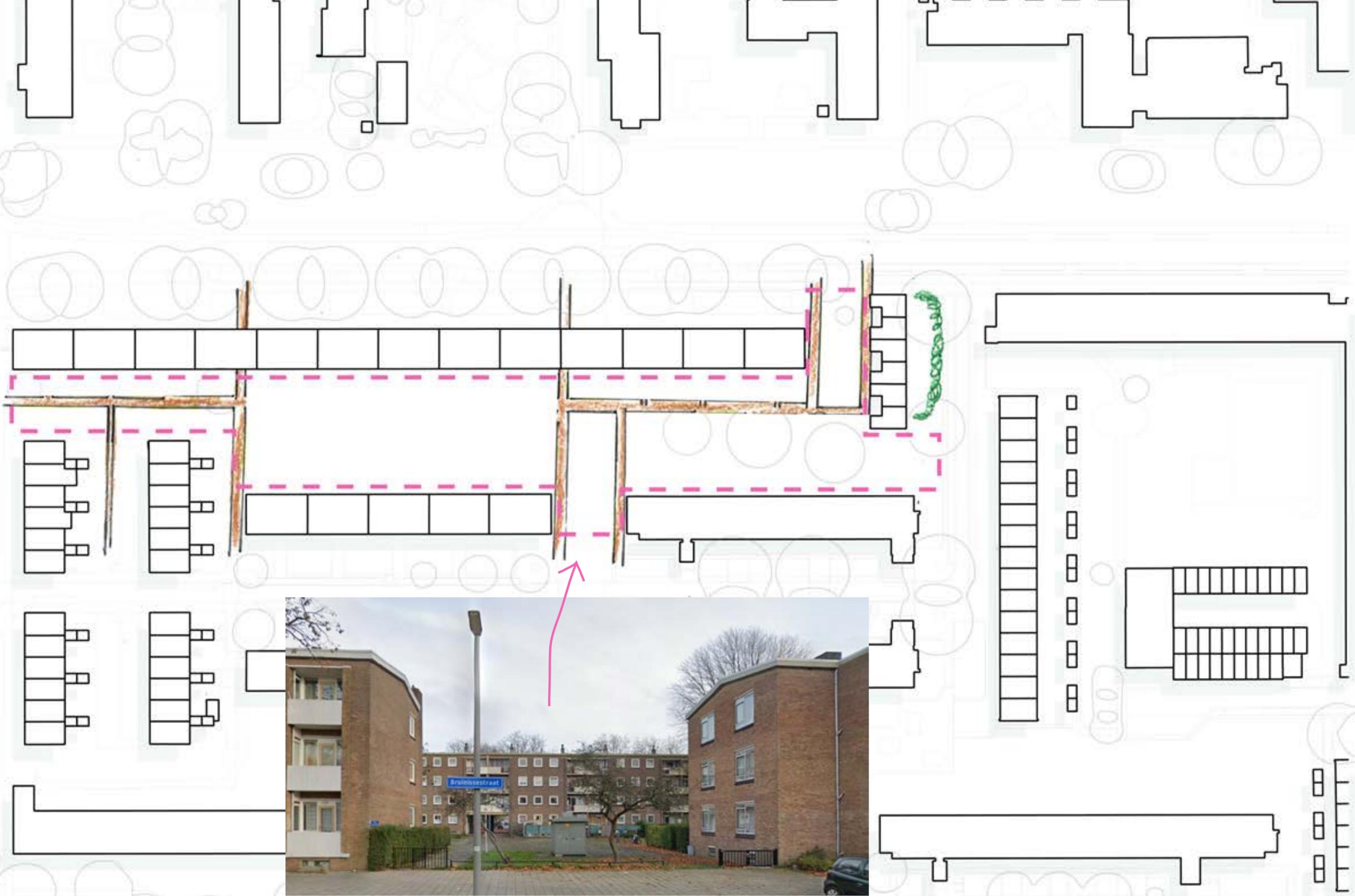


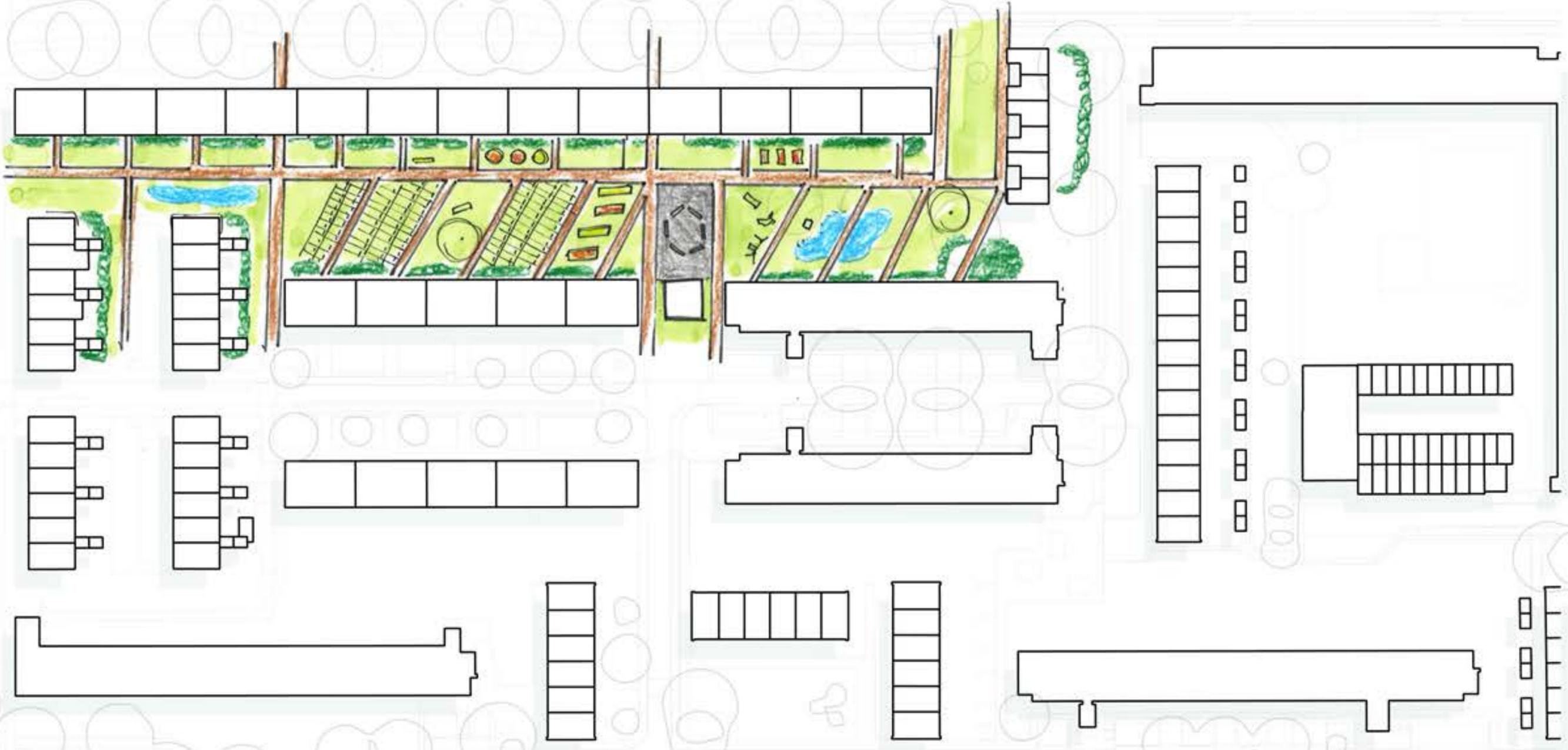
the diagonal



Filling in the diagonal
with program







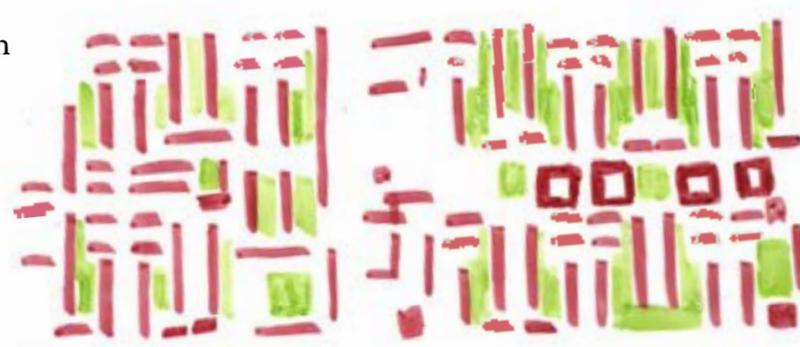


the impact of eternal graves

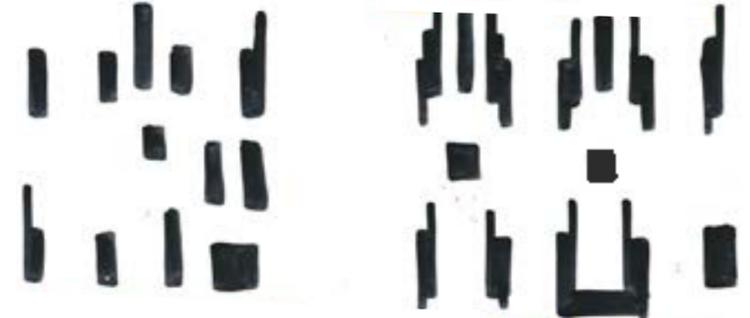
Analysis

This is the plan of the north of Pendrecht.

Green = cemeteries
Red = buildings



After the buildings are removed, the cemeteries (in black) remain.



The figure ground that's left when you cannot build on the cemeteries.



Possible future designs



Apartment blocks

Landscape park typology

Strip parcelling



Handelsplein

focus: urban greening

strange height differences



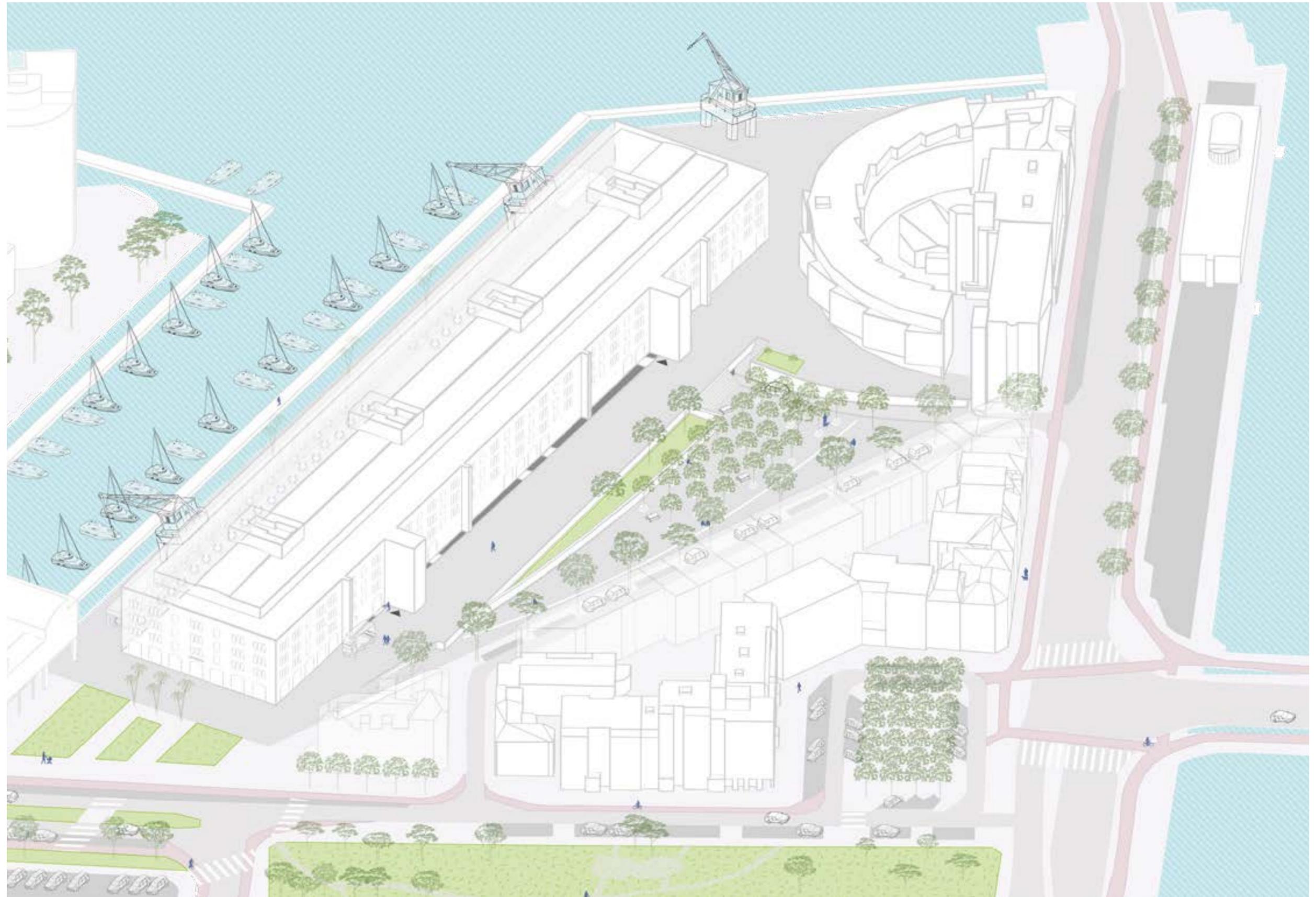
parking entrance in the middle of the square



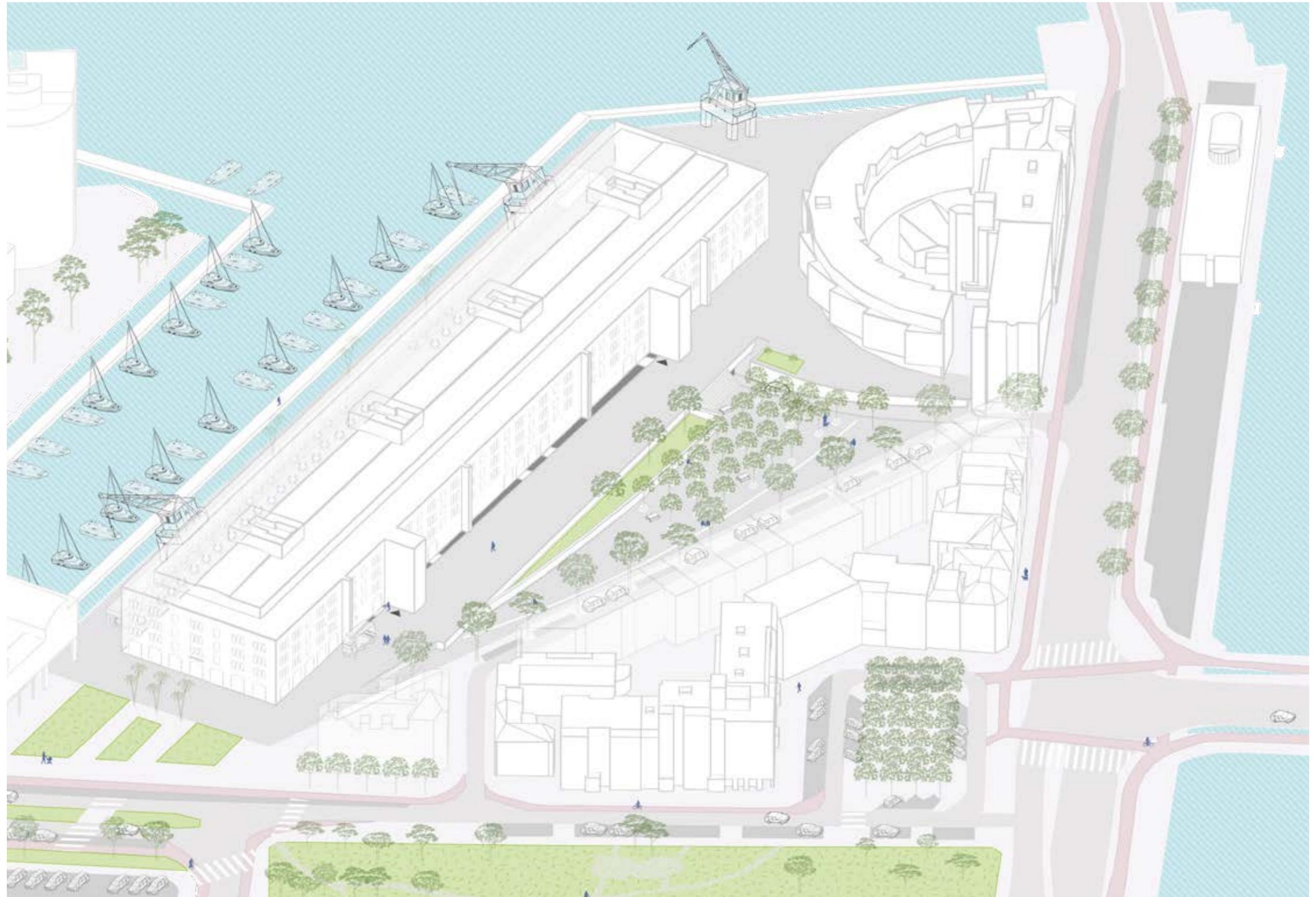
demand for green and social functions



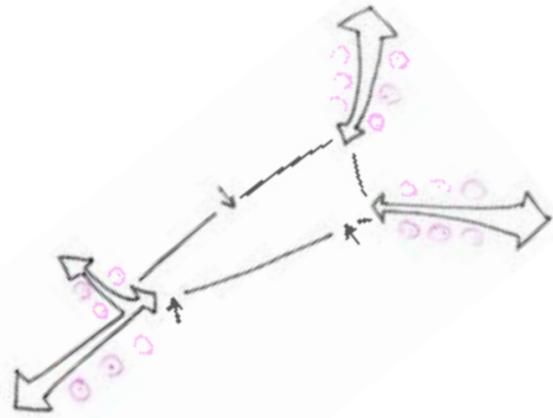
*current
situation*



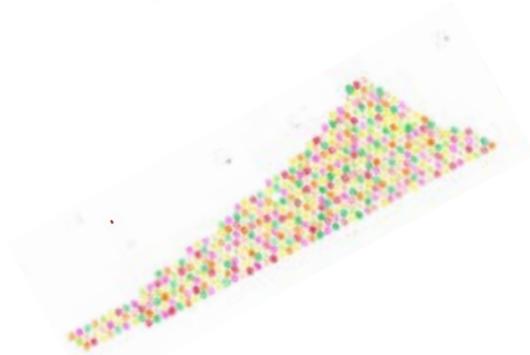
*current
situation*



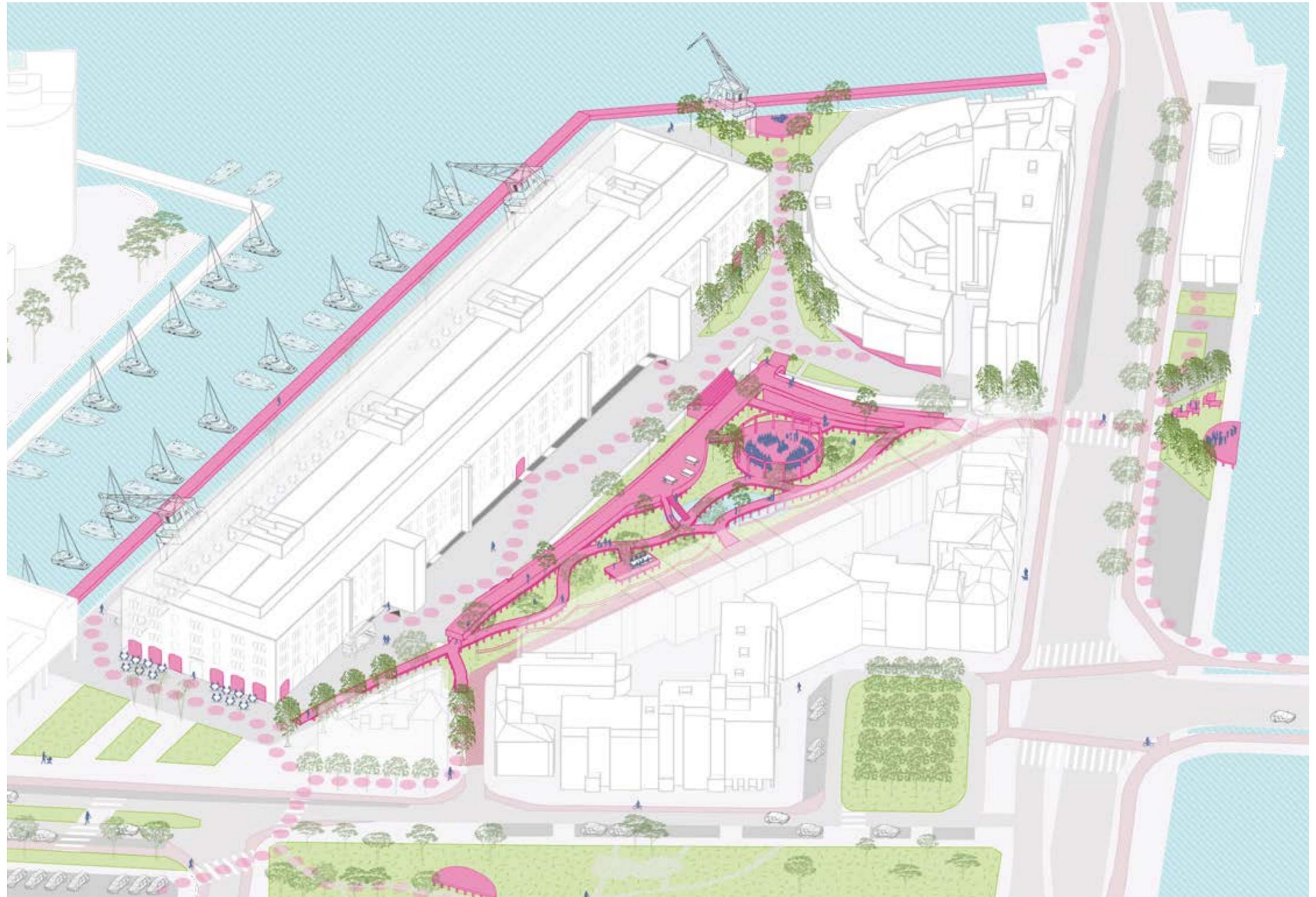
Handelsplein 2050



The **transition zones** behave as funnels



Adding graves



Handelsplein 2050



Boardwalk material reference:
Houston Arboretum & Nature Center. Image by C. Spade (2022)
from <https://www.houstoniamag.com/travel-and-outdoors/2022/04/guide-to-hiking-houston-arboretum>



Handelsplein 2050

Dutch death ritual

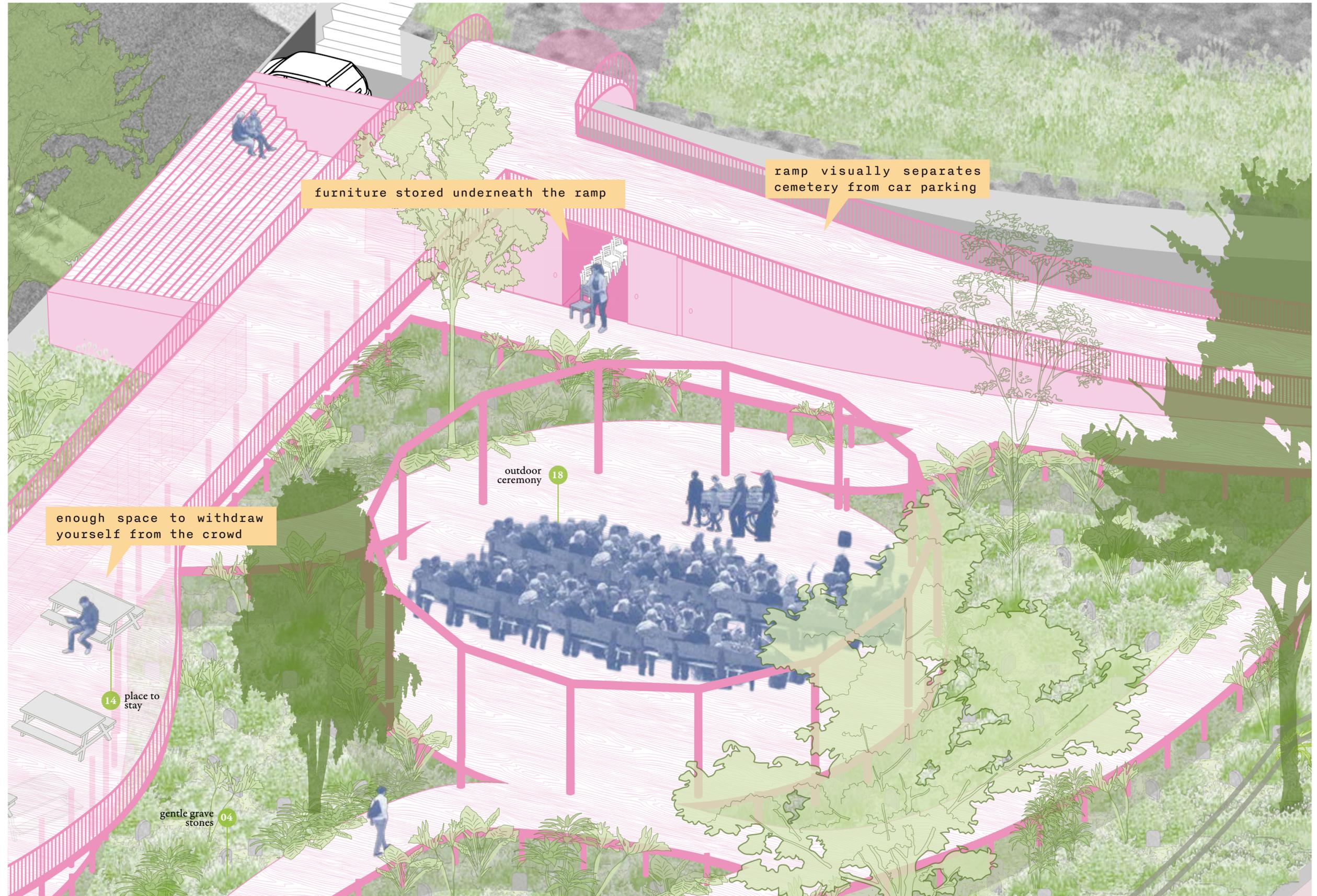
- 1. funeral ceremony**
2. disposal practices
3. period of bereavement



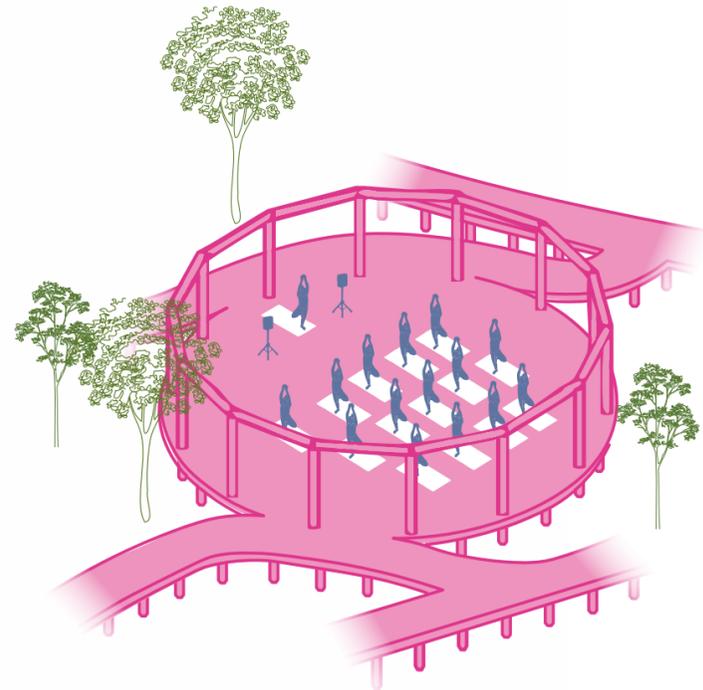
Handelsplein 2050

Dutch death ritual

1. funeral ceremony
2. disposal practices
3. period of bereavement



flexible ceremony space



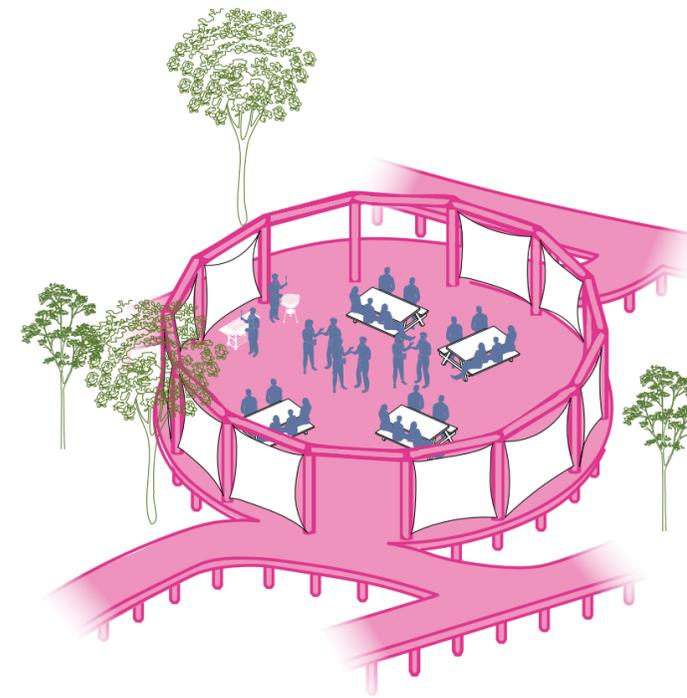
yoga class



market



concert



community event

18

Outdoor ceremony



Open air ceremonies as alternative to traditional indoor spaces, embedded in the surroundings.



funeral in section

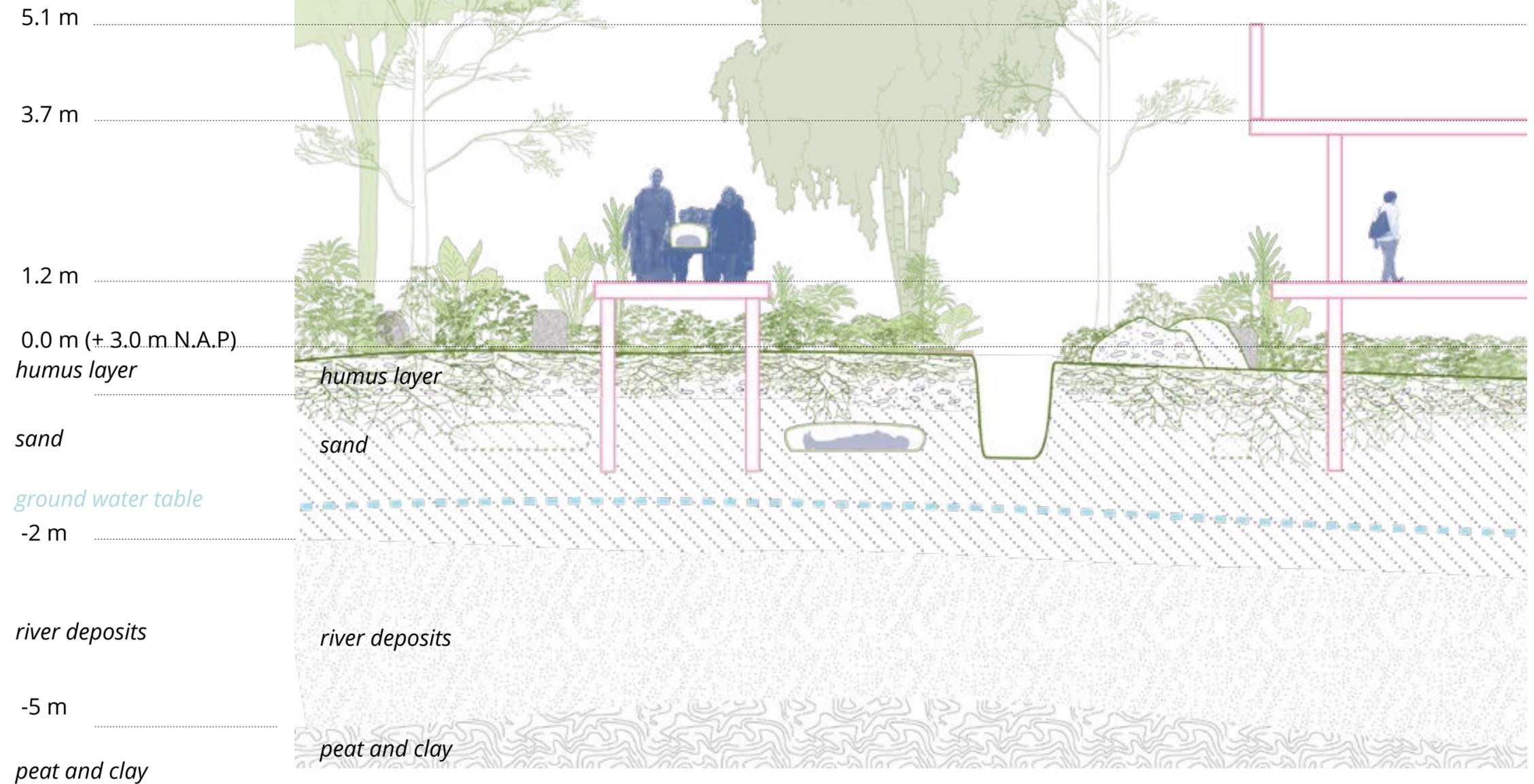
drawn 1:100

Dutch death ritual

1. funeral ceremony

2. disposal practices

3. period of bereavement



funeral in section

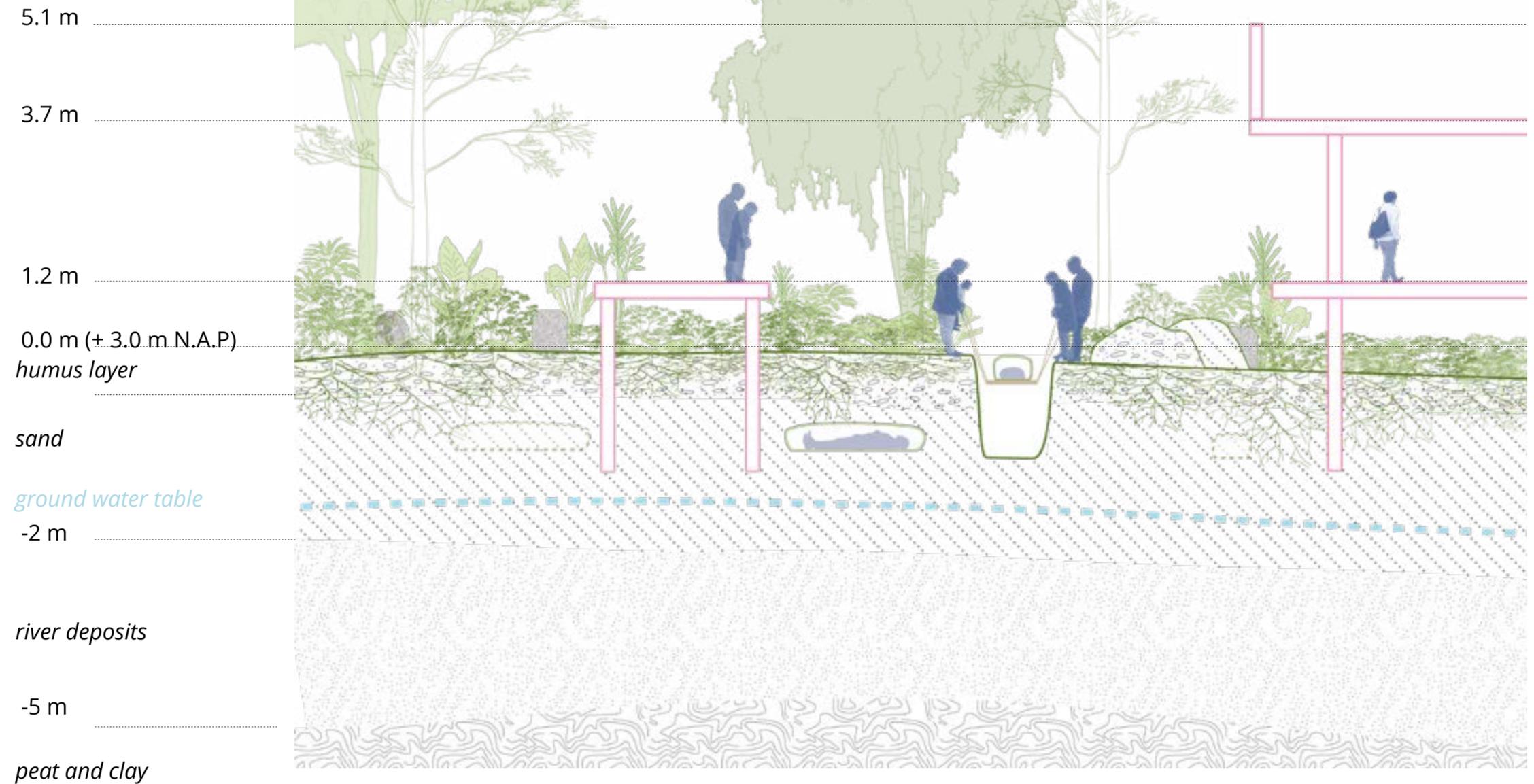
drawn 1:100

Dutch death ritual

1. funeral ceremony

2. disposal practices

3. period of bereavement



grave care in section

Dutch death ritual

1. funeral ceremony
2. disposal practices
- 3. period of bereavement**

↳ **grave care**
reflection
come together

drawn 1:100

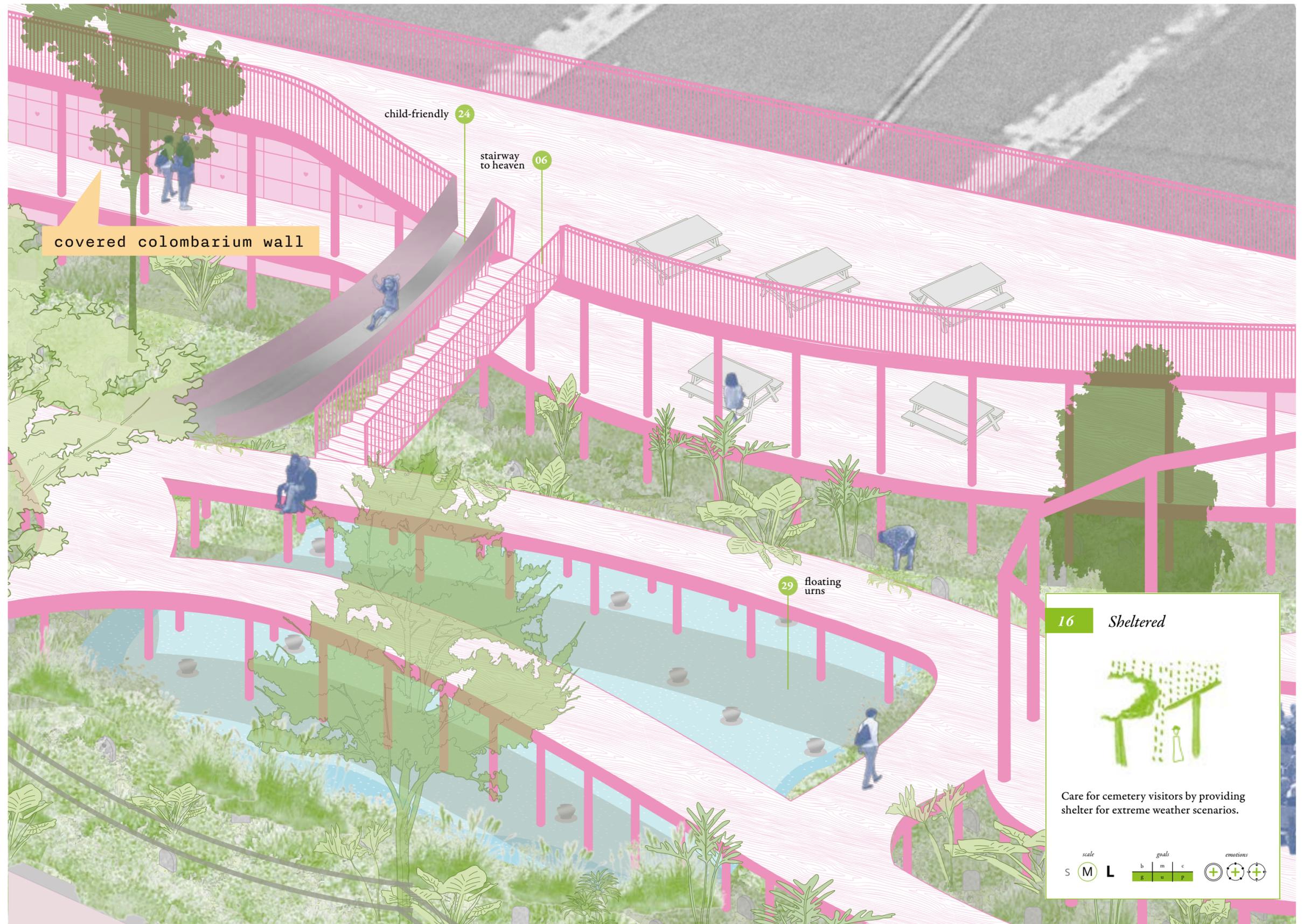
5.1 m
3.7 m
1.2 m
0.0 m (+ 3.0 m N.A.P.)
humus layer
sand
ground water table
-2 m
river deposits
-5 m
peat and clay



Dutch death ritual

- 1. funeral ceremony
- 2. disposal practices
- 3. period of bereavement**

↳ grave care
reflection
come together



16 Sheltered

Care for cemetery visitors by providing shelter for extreme weather scenarios.

scale: S (M) L

goals: b m c, g u p

emotions: (+) (+) (+)

Dutch death ritual

1. funeral ceremony

2. disposal practices

3. period of bereavement

↳ grave care

reflection

come together



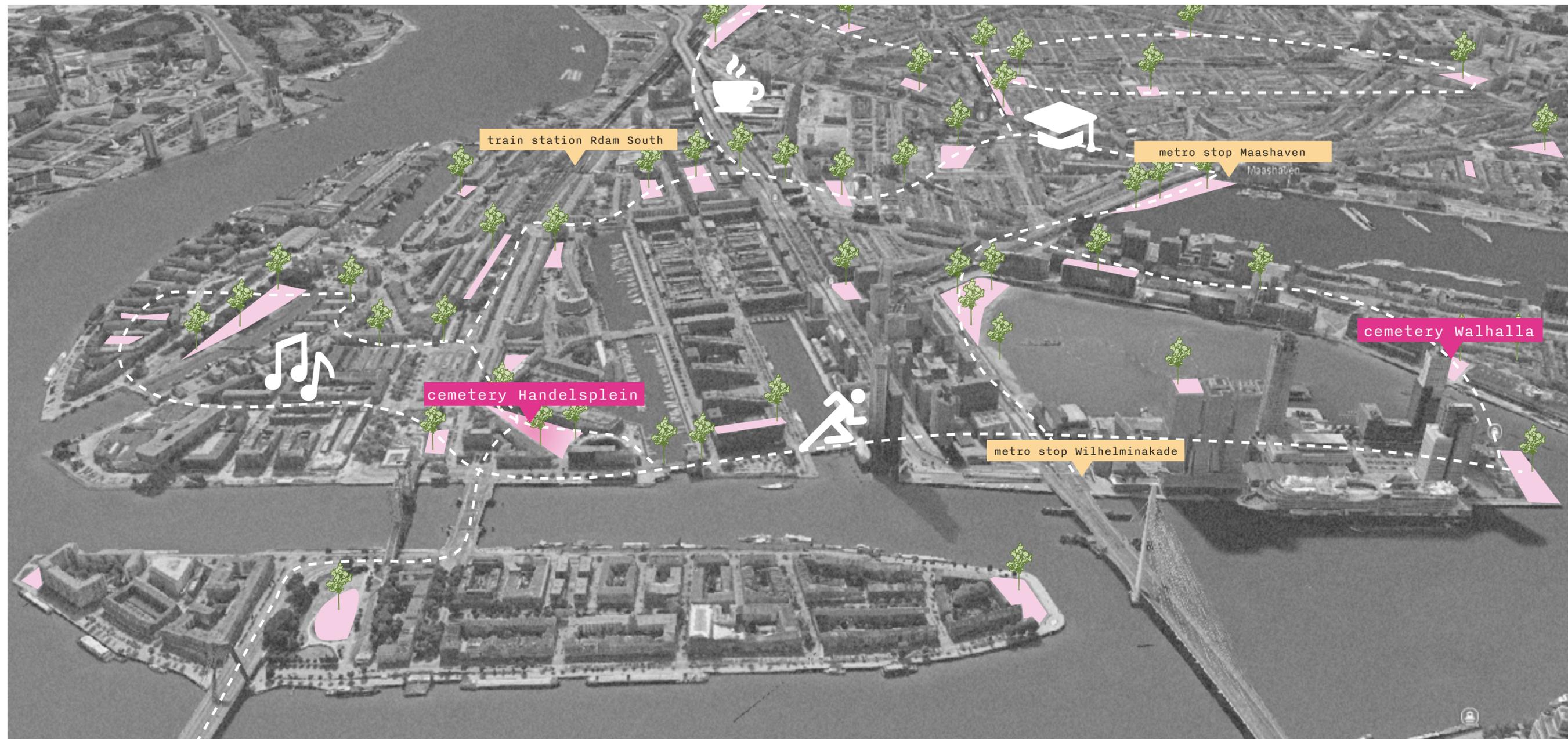
15 *A meal on the cemetery*

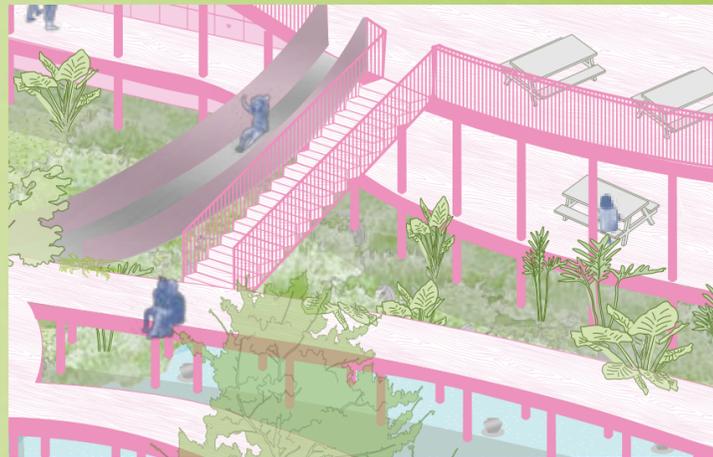
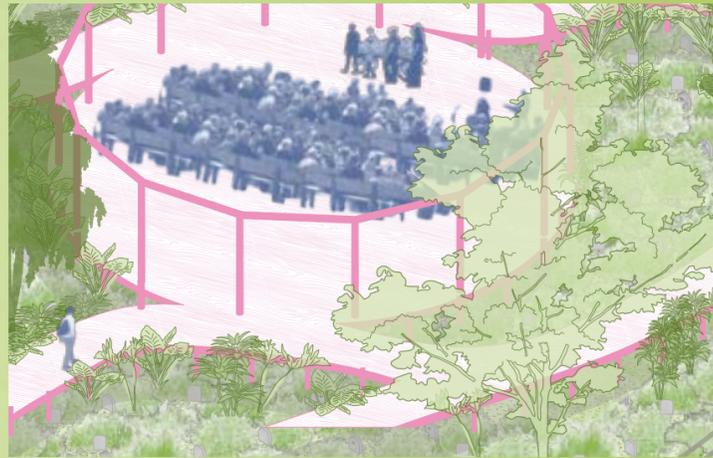


Places for having a meal as a vital medium through which grief, memory, and connection are expressed.



cemetery network





Rest in Peace?

the death and life of
urban cemeteries

P5 Presentation
Nikita Ham
15 January 2026