

# Reflection “The New Social Fabric”

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Urban Architecture

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To say that my journey during the graduation project was not exactly the smoothest one would be an understatement. It has been a journey of highs and most certainly lows as well. One in which the focus would shift constantly and where more than once I myself didn't really seem convinced of what I was doing. I got lost several times, not really knowing where to go. It made it difficult to stay motivated and even made me lose faith at some occasions as to whether I was able to make a strong design project, guided by good academic research. Yet, I remained persistent, continuously exploring and reflecting on my work. I believe this project has ultimately given me valuable insights into the different relationships between architecture, community, and the social fabric of urban spaces.

### **Reflection on the design process**

My design process began with broad ambitions that needed refinement. Initially, I was interested in designing a new center for Hoboken with integrated mobility solutions, a practical and seemingly important issue. However, as I delved deeper, I found myself questioning whether this approach was addressing a meaningful research question. This early pivot was the first of several shifts that characterized my process.

The "Inventing the Fabric" collaborative research provided a strong foundation, investigating how ideological shifts influenced housing typologies in Hoboken and Kiel. This historical understanding became crucial as I narrowed my focus toward the relationship between architectural design and community formation. The transition from studying "beauty in architecture" to investigating the social implications of spatial boundaries demonstrates how my design priorities evolved from mere aesthetic concerns to more socially engaged considerations.

After the completion of the masterplan, it became more clear what type of building I would attempt to create: a housing complex in combination with a sports hall and youth spaces. I felt like there was a need to create social housing that addresses the tension between private and communal spaces. To achieve this, I ended up proposing volumes arranged around a central courtyard, clearly drawing inspiration from the Hennig complex near the site while attempting to avoid its pitfalls. It would feature staggered terraces incorporating greenery, suggesting an attempt to create graduated transitions between private and public domains as a direct response to the research insights about failed communal spaces in historical social housing projects.

The most challenging aspect of the design process was maintaining focus amid the complexity of the social, historical, and architectural factors at play. My design evolved from simple sketches to increasingly refined models as I incorporated lessons from each case study. The layout reflects influence from the interbellum social housing blocks, while the attention to human scale and material expression shows awareness of the issues with modernist social housing and the relation with Blikfabriek.

### **Integration of research and design**

The integration of research and design represents both a strength and challenge in this project. My catalog structure demonstrates a methodical approach to building an evidence-based design argument. By talking with the community and examining various case studies through

consistent analytical frameworks, I established clear parameters that informed my design decisions.

The research into Hennig I proved particularly influential. Its exploration of a "palace for workers" concept and the subsequent evolution of its courtyards directly informed my design's approach to social housing. The critical commentary on Hennig I prompted me to seek a more authentic architectural expression in my own design that honors residents' dignity without resorting to superficial decoration, which is where, among others, the Sasse building became an inspiration. I also attempted to avoid communal spaces that would suffer from vandalism. My design therefore incorporates a courtyard that is a lot more open and accessible. Many of the living spaces overlook this area, allowing for social control. A terraced façade exemplifies this integration, creating graduated zones of privacy while maintaining visual connections to communal spaces.

A particular difficult part for me was to see research and design as one whole instead of two completely separate products. There were often periods in which I paid attention to one, while feeling like I was neglecting the other. Working on the research didn't feel like making progress in the design, at least until it became time to draw conclusions from the research. Likewise, working on the design felt like there was no research being done: it didn't feel like a research-by-design process.

### **Reflection on Methodology**

My methodology evolved significantly throughout the project. I recognized the need for more targeted research approaches as the project developed. The decision to conduct interviews with community members was particularly valuable, though perhaps somewhat superficial and underutilized in the final design. The conversations revealed resident perspectives and insights about the perceived identity of the neighbourhood and how spaces are actually experienced rather than how they were intended to function. In future work, I would expand this participatory dimension and gather more sophisticated responses that can be better incorporated in the design process.

Site observation and mapping patterns of use around the Blikfabriek proved useful for understanding the immediate context and use of spaces. This methodology helped identify active nodes and circulation patterns that informed the siting and orientation of my design. The case study approach allowed me to extract specific design principles from each precedent, creating a toolkit of strategies rather than simply emulating a single model. The analytical lenses of historical context & ideology, architectural expression, patterns of use and material use emerged as a structured framework to examine case studies systematically.

My methodology could have been strengthened by more rigorous documentation of the combination of research and design process. While I thoroughly documented precedents, I was not always as systematic in recording my own ideas and design decisions, sometimes being no more than a mental note, leading me to not always be able to properly explain what I was doing and why. Establishing clearer metrics for evaluating my design against the research findings would have facilitated more objective assessment of whether my proposal successfully addresses the challenges identified in existing housing typologies.

### **Positioning Within the Field**

This project positions itself within the discussions about social housing, community design, and the relationship between architectural form and social life. The addition of communal spaces is really a contemporary trend, but ideas about the things that people can do in these spaces often seems like an afterthought. By examining how architectural ideologies have manifested in Hoboken and Kiel specifically, my research contributes to understanding how architectural movements translate into local contexts and evolve over time.

My approach addresses concerns about community resilience and social sustainability, while acknowledging the historical lineage of social housing experimentation. Rather than pursuing radical innovation, my design seeks thoughtful evolution that fits the area, learning from both traditional and modernist approaches to create housing that is better able to withstand changing community needs and creates spaces that invoke a sense of belonging.

The project engages with debates about safety and functionality in communal spaces. The historical trajectory from traditional row housing (emphasizing privacy and individual ownership) to social housing (introducing communal spaces) to contemporary developments (returning to privacy-focused approaches) reveals the pendulum swing of architectural ideology. My design attempts to find balance in this spectrum, recognizing that neither complete privacy nor total collectivization fully serves residents' needs.

My position within the field acknowledges architecture's limitations in solving social problems (some solutions lie within politics) while still asserting its important role in shaping community life. The design recognizes that architectural determinism has failed historically, yet thoughtful spatial design can still create opportunities for community formation when aligned with social realities and resident needs.

### **Personal and Professional Development**

This project has certainly transformed my understanding of architecture's relationship to community. I've developed a lot of appreciation for how spatial arrangements can influence social dynamics and how architectural expression can either reinforce or challenge social hierarchies.

I've improved my ability to analyze existing buildings critically and systematically. The development of consistent analytical frameworks has strengthened my research skills, but more importantly I've grown in doing field work research. I'm used to gathering information from a book or other media, either physical or digital. Gathering information on site, from people who live there and know it like no one else, was an incredibly significant experience, for which I had to really step out of my comfort zone.

Another significant area of personal growth has been developing comfort with ambiguity and iteration. As mentioned earlier, this project featured many shifts in focus and direction. Learning to embrace these shifts as part of the design process rather than setbacks has been challenging but ultimately rewarding. This increased tolerance for uncertainty will serve me well in future architectural practice.

I've also gained appreciation for architecture's temporal dimension. Studying how buildings like Hennig I have evolved over a century reinforced that architectural design extends beyond the moment of completion. My design for the Blikfabriek site attempts to anticipate adaptation

and change, creating spaces that can evolve with community needs rather than imposing rigid solutions.

Looking ahead, I feel it would be valuable to further develop participatory design methods that meaningfully involve communities in architectural processes. While this project incorporated some community perspectives, more robust participatory frameworks, with interviews that carry more weight, could further enrich the dialogue between architectural expertise and lived experience.

### **To finish off**

This graduation project has been a journey through the complex terrain of social housing, community design, and architectural identity. Despite numerous challenges and changes in direction, I've learned a lot from the research and design work. The catalog of case studies serves as an argument for a more nuanced approach to social housing. One that learns from historical experiments while responding to changing needs.

My design for the Blikfabriek site represents not an endpoint but a contribution to an ongoing conversation about how architecture can support social community life in Hoboken and Kiel. The social fabric of communities is woven through countless interactions, but the spaces where these interactions occur matter profoundly. By designing thoughtfully at the boundaries between private and public life, architecture can create conditions where community flourishes without sacrificing individual dignity and private life.