Intensification of experiences

An exploration of art as a medium to connect and boost regional tourism in Groningen through intensification of experiences along the Pieter pad



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Abstract

This project explores the role of architecture in regenerating an area through sustainable tourism. This is explored through the lens of the "Nij Begun" Agenda implemented by the Dutch government to foster health, improve quality of life, provide opportunities for young generations and encourage economic development within the provinces of Groningen and North Drenthe. Nij Begun targets areas that have been exploited for decades through the extraction of gas and clay, resulting in severe consequences such as earthquakes, damaged buildings and economic and mental challenges for the inhabitants. (*Herstel - Nij Begun*, 2025)

With a dire need for a new beginning, the economic agenda of Nij Begun focuses on investments in five specific sectors, namely: sustainable energy, health, agriculture, industry and leisure economy (*Economie - Nij Begun*, 2026) of which this project focuses specifically on leisure economy through tourism.

A solid plan of transformation is required to identify the missing component for Nij Begun's success by introducing an innovative aspect to tourism while also enhancing the current tourism. Therefore, this project explores the introduction of art as a tool to attract another demographic of visitors to Groningen by offering more diverse experiences while connecting the existing tourism approaches of nature and cultural history.

This shift will be in the form of a public building located in the village of Winsum intended to serve as a hub connecting a network of interventions across different locations and different forms of tourism throughout the region of Groningen. Winsum's centrality and its placement at the intersection of a variety of touristic spaces provides great potential for advancing the goals of Nij Begun.

Introduction

Problem statement

The region of Groningen is currently facing the consequences of an insufficient and unsustainable economic structure based on gas extraction, aside from the undeniable physical damage to the environment and landscape, they are also facing the lowest regional economic growth percentage compared to other regions in the Netherlands (CBS: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2025). Groningen and North Drenthe have seen limited economic investment and growing social challenges, particularly in the earthquake zone, although investments in the economic structures elsewhere in the country have been partially financed by the revenues from gas extraction. (Klompien, 2023)

Despite the many qualities in the province of Groningen such as the diverse landscapes, walking and cycling trails, water networks and history, the region is significantly behind on both domestic and international tourism compared to the rest of the Netherlands.(Statista, 2025) This is due to the disconnect between the different touristic spaces and a lack of overall identity. As a result, the province is losing access to opportunities of economic development through employment, increased investment in local infrastructure and facilities and cultural exchange and preservation. (Ekstrom, 2025)

Relevance

This project is relevant in its response to current economic and social challenges in the region of Groningen by addressing the existing shortage in touristic infrastructure and strategy at a time where the region is leaning towards stronger reliance on a leisure economy.

The processes and experimentation within this project can expand on existing knowledge by providing ideas and a different perspective towards the vision of the Nij Begun agenda through the lens of architecture. By addressing the challenges related to increased tourism and experimenting on how to balance between tourism and benefits to local communities. Recognizing that social and economic goals can occasionally become conflicting, the project looks for architectural solutions that can resolve these conflicts and promote more mutually beneficial outcomes for both visitor and resident.

The presence of the existing art collective "De Ploeg" provides an additional opportunity to position art as a method of tourism. By building upon the group's experimental and collaborative practices and utilising art as a strategy within the architectural design process, the project both responds to the cultural context and introduces new spatial and programmatic interpretations.

Objective and motivation

The design objective of this project is to produce architectural solutions integrating leisure, community activities and tourism to trigger a shift from an economic model based on extraction towards less invasive positive development that benefits the inhabitants and fosters social cohesion. The design shift will be in the form of a public building located in the village of Winsum intended to serve as a hub from which tourists can experience the other qualities in the surroundings. The building form, expression and typology should become a force of attraction using the building as public art and the site as a canvas.

The design intends to use art to connect existing tourism while emphasising an overlooked identity of Groningen that is not taken advantage of to the fullest of its potential in the promotion of tourism in the region. The unexploited potential of having an art group in the region with such diverse art styles including expressionism, impressionism and constructivism (Groninger Museum, 2025) provides an opportunity to promote art in the region while promoting the various landscapes and cities that inspired such art creating a strong symbiotic relationship. Their art also varied beyond painting and drawing and delved into music (De Ploeg 100 jaar et al., n.d.), architecture and sculptures (Rozema, 2018). This provides a possibility to utilise different forms of art to produce a strong programmatic impulse full of diverse activations.

A challenge posed by Groningen's reliance on landscape and outdoor activities is that their current tourism is seasonal, limited to spring and summer. Therefore, one of the main goals is to increase year-round tourism through this artistic programmatic impulse. This can be achieved by prioritising short stay tourism in summer and spring emphasising art outdoor tours. While in winter and autumn focusing on more long stay and local tourism such as courses, workshops and lectures.

The objective of the design is to revitalise the region and to contribute to broader regional outcomes. Therefore, an emphasis on collaboration and a stronger together approach is important to the success of the Nij Begun agenda and to the design. This can be through connecting to walking and cycling routes as a method to experience the landscapes in the paintings by De Ploeg or connecting to other local art institutions.

Research questions

Accordingly, the research by design question that this project will examine is how art integrated architecture can be used to boost tourism and bring economic prosperity for locals through collaboration, architectural expression, typology, innovation and programmatic experimentation?

How can artistic method, practices and philosophy be integrated into architectural expression to enhance the identity and attractiveness of a region?

How can a public building aimed at tourism balance its role in attracting visitors while not overwhelming the local context and facilities?

How can the specific art forms of De Ploeg inspire the program and design of a public building?

Scope

The village of Winsum is an excellent base for exploring the surrounding areas. From the Marenland touristic spot, it's easy to discover the Groningen countryside, on bicycle along the Reitdiep, on foot towards the Pieterpad hiking trail or in a canoe on the many canals. Winsum's strong identity labelled as "the most beautiful village in the Netherlands" by the ANWB makes it an attraction point itself with its historic charm with 59 monuments from castles to old houses and historic farms combined with its Wierden landscape. (*Discover Winsum*, n.d.) This makes the site for the design at the Marenland an ideal location to place a hub that is meant to connect the region due to its character, connectivity and centrality.

The design of the programme therefore must consider the existing functions taking place on the site and take advantage and connect to them. The artistic programme should elevate the site and not remove the existing allowing visitors to observe, experience and produce art while maintaining the site's purpose as a spot for touristic stay.

Approach

Methods

The process for this design focuses on a research by design approach to navigate the complexity of this multi-layered design. This approach relies on not separating the research and design into two separate phases but combining them into a continuous state of experimentation and iteration. Research by design views design work as a special form of research. It considers theory, application, analysis and imagination as inseparable and as a medium to conceive and develop architectural ideation. Research is not only about preparation, description, and explanation, but also more importantly about projection and speculation to produce new knowledge. Research is therefore a form of design and design a form of research.

To gain understanding of the site and region analysis of history, the current conditions and the future aspirations need to be developed including understanding of accessibility, ecology, tourism, economy and industry, existing architecture and urban development. This helps act as a base on which the design aspirations and direction can be informed. Combined with a fieldwork analysis of the site through the site visit, which provides a more realistic impression of the conditions and experiences to gain perceived knowledge of the space beyond the theoretical and written knowledge. Experiencing the surroundings and visiting the region from the site provides perspective on how a prospective tourist would experience the different touristic attractions and provides first-hand experience of the accessibility, character and memory of the region to gain further understanding of potential opportunities and constraints. These research processes will then be represented through various forms of interpretation including mapping, writing, reflections and interviews.

Furthermore, another part of the process will be looking into case studies and literature of comparable circumstances, which provide insight to guide the design process. Understanding the design choices and logic behind other projects can help guide and inspire this design process to optimize the positive aspects of previous knowledge while learning from potential mistakes.

Due to the diversity of approaches available in art inspired architecture, this process will include multiple variants and reiterations which all contribute to a continuous progression of the design. These will be informed by a strong understanding of De Ploeg's artistic language and identifying what makes their art special. Followed by various explorations of how to apply and translate these qualities onto the site in the form of architectural expression. These art experiments aim to create varied outcomes and produce new knowledge and ways of understanding and expressing space through art to inspire the architecture and to turn imaginative concepts into physical spaces (Hoberg, 2023). Therefore, optimising the expressiveness of the design while implementing knowledge of the site.

Theoretical framework

The integration of art in architecture is a thoroughly discussed topic in architecture literature and theory. Throughout history architecture stood at the intersection of art and science. The strong influence of art on architecture has remained significant into the current contemporary architecture. (Ghisleni, 2023)

Art integrated buildings act as landmarks, fostering community engagement and inviting visitors. Murals, sculptures, or digital installations enrich the identity of buildings, enhancing both functionality and aesthetic appeal. These artistic interventions create interactive, emotionally meaningful spaces that allow further engagement with cultural identity and enhances public experience especially in a tourism context. (Bitat, 2025)

Art could even be viewed as a generative force in architectural design, capable of influencing form, program, materiality, and perception, rather than as an applied or decorative component. Therefore, artistic techniques like abstraction, material experimentation, and Composition play a crucial role in influencing how people perceive spaces. Art becomes a tool for enhancing emotions and experience when incorporated into architecture, strengthening the bond between people and their surroundings. As said by Rino Levi "There is only one art and its value is measured by the emotions it triggers in us. Painting and sculpture can be independent, however, when applied to architecture, they become part of a whole. This lesson on collectivity and shared experiences starts during project development and touches every single person who has the opportunity to visit the architectural work." (Ghisleni, 2023)

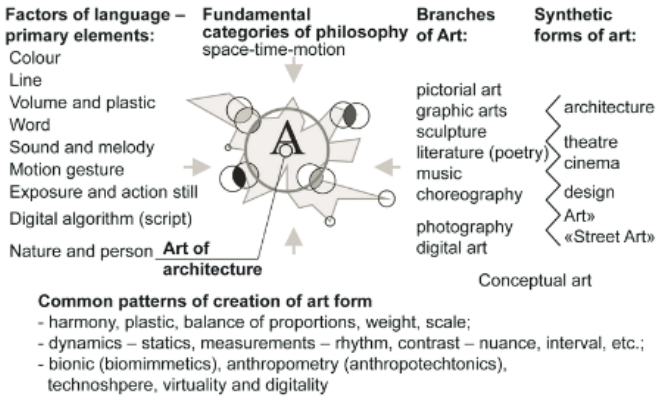

Figure 1 A graphical chart of the art "field" of the art integration. (Dutsev, 2017)

This strong influence of art on architecture and their direct integration expressing identity, inducing emotions and shaping form and expression is essential for such a public building as the one being designed in this project. The building's purpose as a regional hub is to attract and to communicate the regional identity to visitors while also connecting to the local community as an expression of their cultural heritage. Therefore, this building design process will incorporate art and artistic strategies and practices throughout all stages of the design from the program to volumetric form to ornamentation.

Results

The essence of De Ploeg

De Ploeg as an art collective are defined by their diversity connected through Groningen, making the region an integral part of their artistic identity. Their artworks varied across different art styles.

They are mostly known for the expressionist and impressionist paintings of the Groningen landscapes including fields, farms, churches, the Reitdiep and the mudflats, captured in bright colours and expressive brushstrokes. (Kunstcentrum De Ploeg, 2026) These painting often exaggerated the landscapes through colour, shape and texture producing an intensification of these spaces to provoke stronger emotions, transforming them from ordinary landscapes to extraordinary scenes experienced through the paintings.

In contrast a few members of the group such as Wobbe Alkema, Jan van der Zee and Hendrik Werkman also explored constructivism including work produced in prints and painting with geometric patterns and abstract forms. This style however did not grow into an important movement within De Ploeg. (Groninger Museum, 2025)

Site opportunities

To apply the ideologies of De Ploeg onto the site, it was necessary to develop an understanding of the site opportunities along with analysis of the broader context of the surroundings. This analysis is summarized in a variety of maps based on scale including the larger regional scale, the medium village scale and the small site scale.

The larger regional scale map in figure 2 shows the three main regional touristic themes including the Wadden sea naturescape, the Groningen cityscape and the open landscapes. The map also highlights Winsum's centrality and connectivity. Firstly, through the railway connection to the city of Groningen, the connection to the Pieter pad and finally the ecological connection to the Rietdiep providing an opportunity to become part of the plan of renaturalisation of the Rietdiep.

The medium village scale map in figure 3 provides information on the historical village with its distinctive character with the windmills having a very strong presence in the village and acting as landmarks.

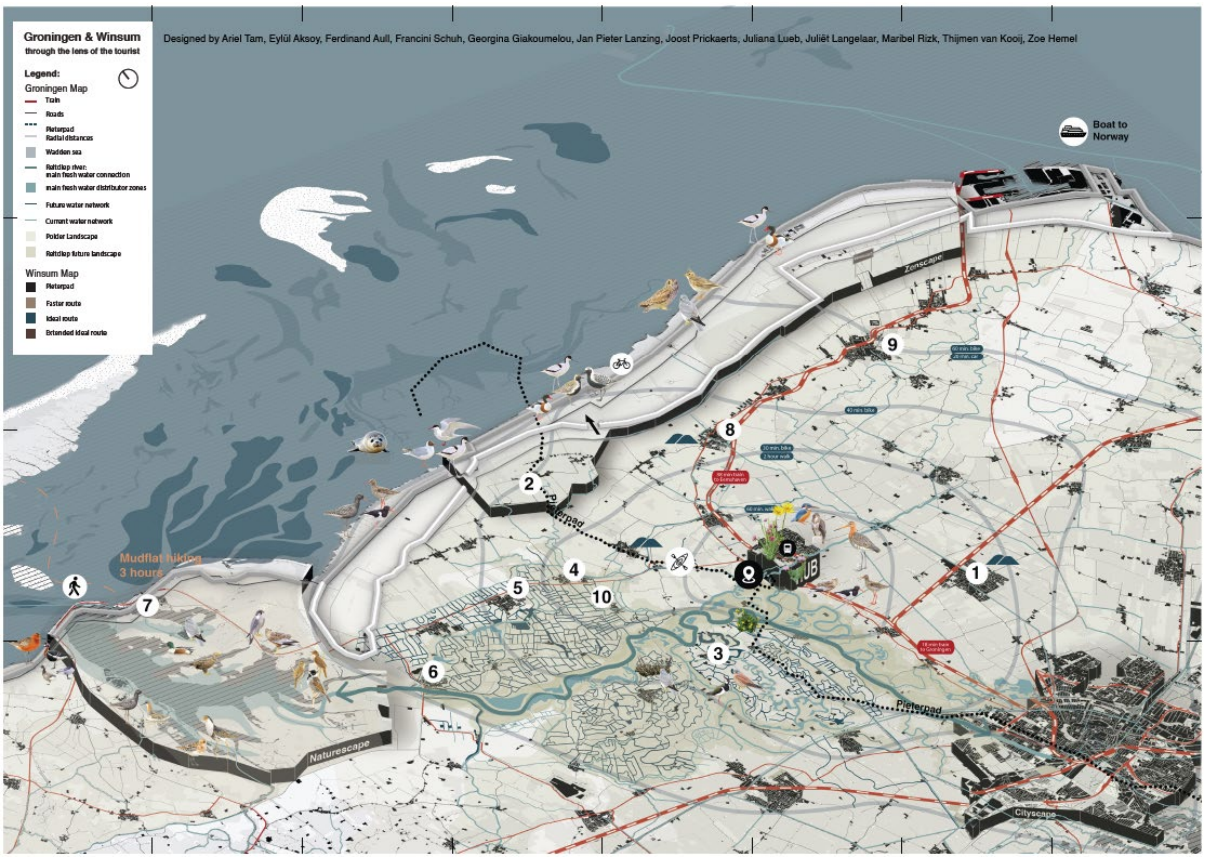

Figure 2 Larger regional scale map

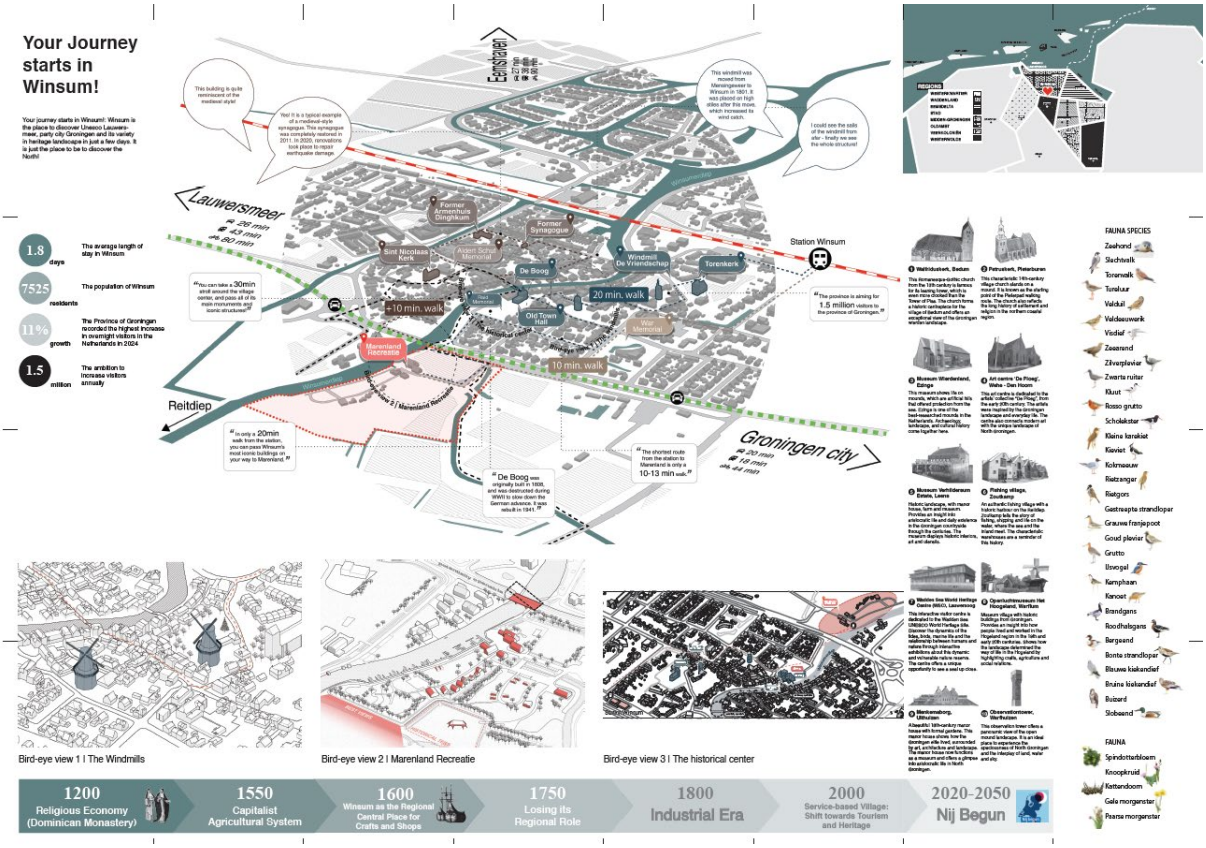

Figure 3 Medium village scale map

Finally, the map of the immediate site highlights the site as an intersection point of many different conditions providing many opportunities of connection to the village, the water, the open landscape and the weirde as part of regional landscape heritage. Within the map the site is divided into three main areas based on the distinct characteristics of the spaces.

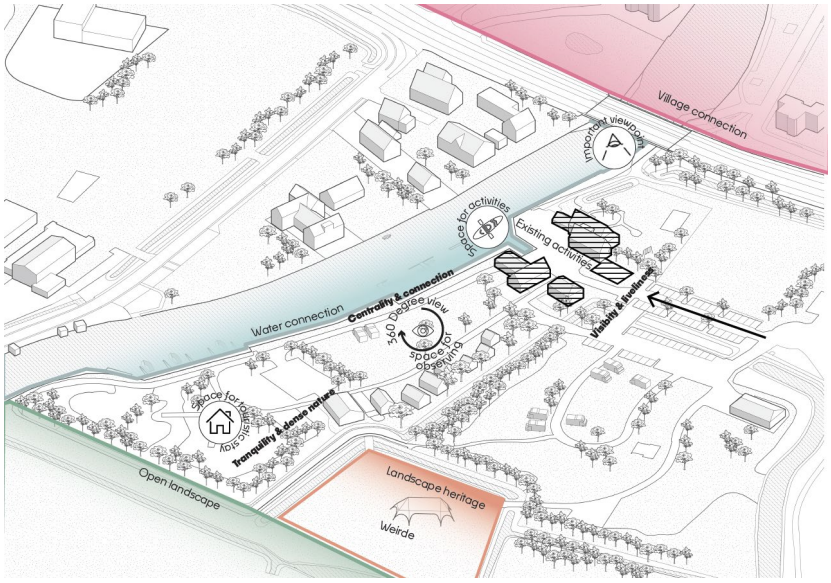

Figure 4 Small scale site opportunities map

Variants: conceptual application on site

Approach 1: Constructivism and abstraction

This approach focused on treating the site as an abstract composition and by adding geometric shapes to complete the composition. Then using these geometries to guide the volumes of the new building and to structure the landscape. These abstract forms represented different elements with filled shapes representing built form, while dotted lines showed elevated built volumes and finally continuous lines representing the layout of the landscape. The main concern with this approach was that the abstract forms produced interesting volumes while lacking clear reasoning and logic, resulting in designs that didn't seem to be contextually informed and instead felt superficial.



Figure 5 Process of abstraction of the site into a composition

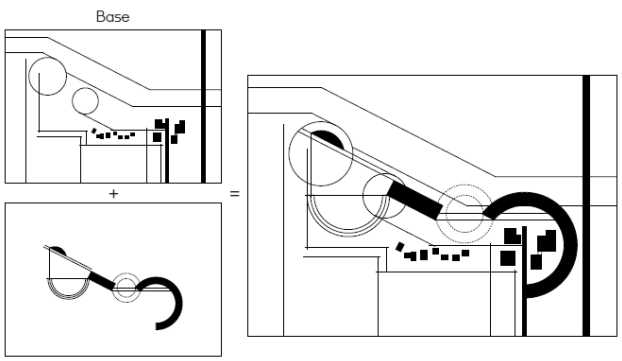

Figure 7 Diagram of the addition of abstract forms to the site

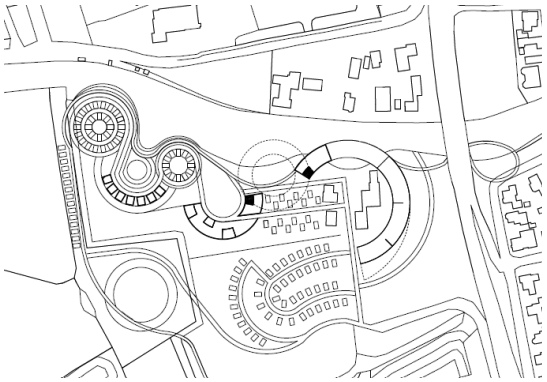

Figure 6 Masterplan of adjusted forms applied on site

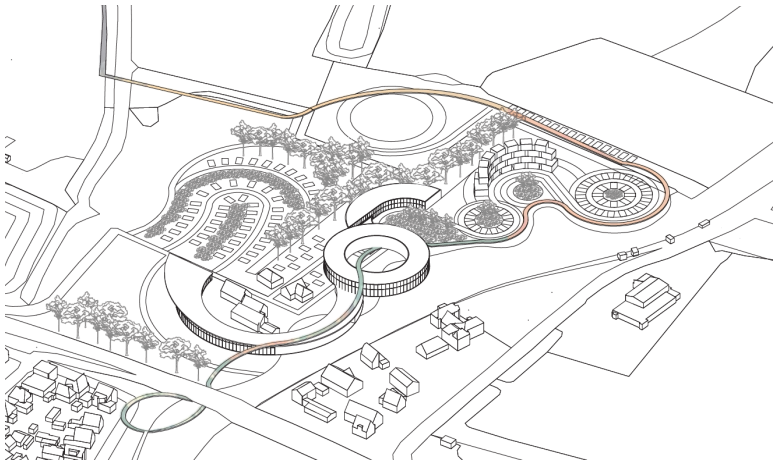

Figure 8 Axonometric view of volumes

Approach2: Expressionism and Intensification

This approach is based on the intensification of the elements already existing on the site to enhance their experience. This will be done to provoke further emotions in the visitors through the intensification of their experience of the spaces on site similarly to the paintings by De Ploeg. This process started with identifying elements that characterize the site. This was then summarized into three themes to intensify, namely the village, the water and the landscape. These themes then guided the intensification through various design solutions including contrast, addition, reshaping and connection shown in figure 9. These initial ideas are then later developed and translated back into the site and adjusted accordingly. Due to the stronger connection with regional tourism and the existing site this approach of intensification was chosen to be developed further into the final design as it provides a strong impression on visitors. That is especially beneficial to a touristic hub as it connects the art to the other forms of tourism in the region and inspires visitors to explore further. The integration of the Pieter pad into the design also acts as a solution to stitch together the different intensified experiences to the existing regional context which further amplifies their cultural values.

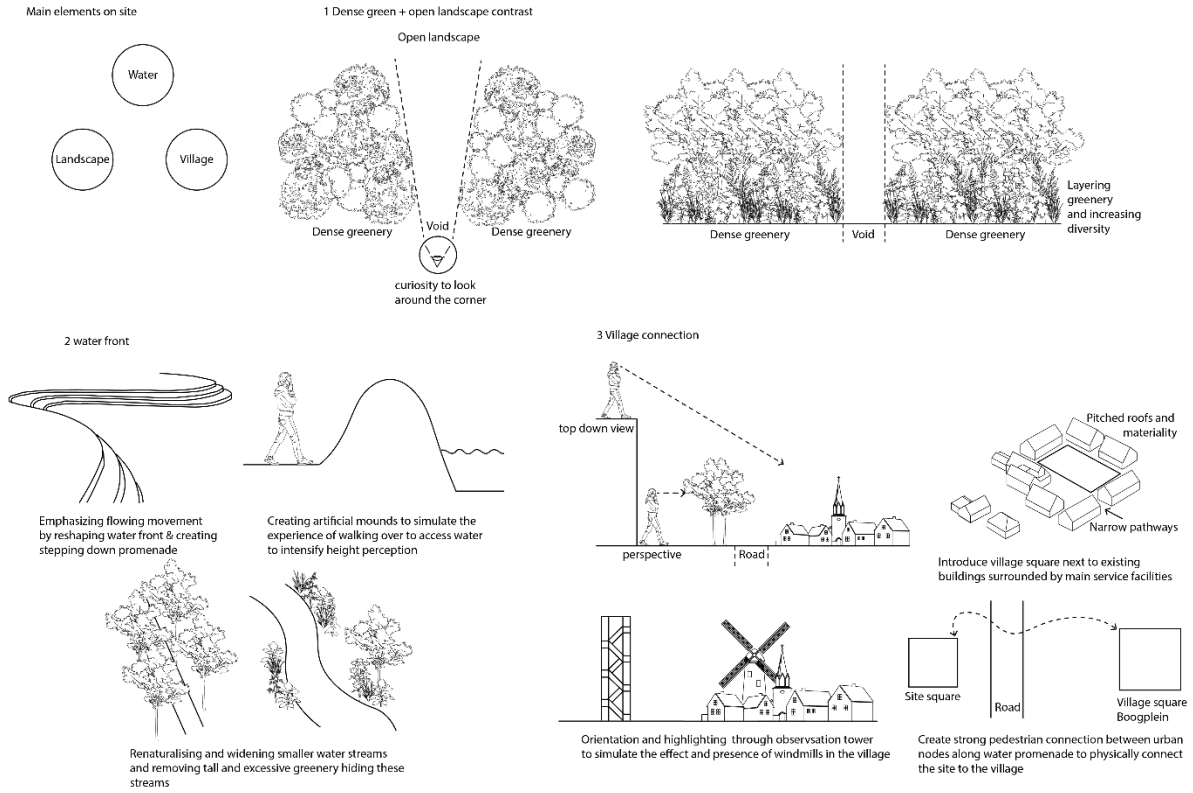

Figure 9 Diagrams of method of intensification

Masterplan

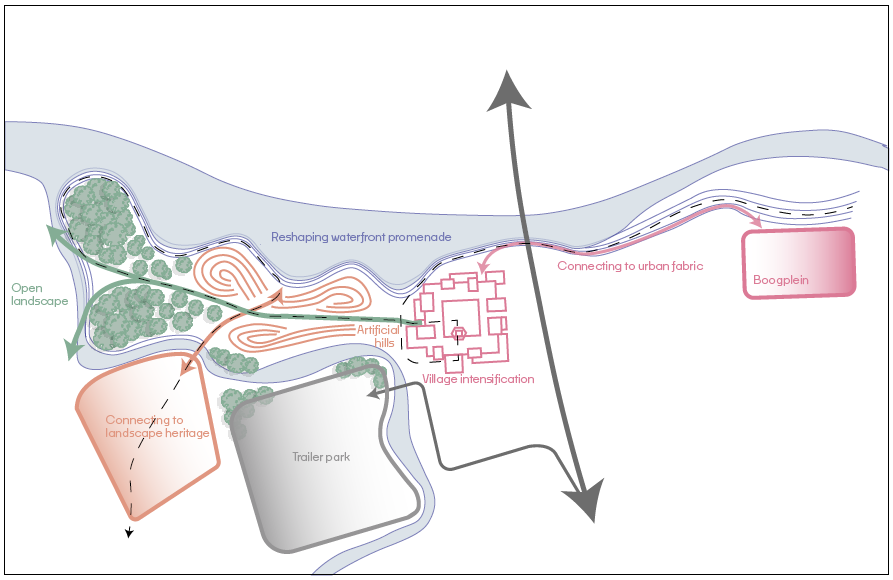

Figure 10 Diagram showing the zones of intensification connected by the Pieterpad

The intensification is represented on site by three distinct zones. The first is the intensification of the village through a public building acting as village square directly connecting towards the fabric of the historical village through visual, physical and representational connections. The central zone intensifies the water shaping of the

landscape through more naturalized water streams surrounded by an intensified floral landscape adding color to the space and provoking emotions. The final zone will be landscape intensification by increasing the contrast between the dense greenery and the open landscape with the dense greenery housing the tents and camping spaces for a strengthened experience of nature. These experiences will then be connected in a sequence using the Pieter pad coming from the historical village through the public building towards the waterfront and passing through the dense greenery to the open landscape.

Main public building

As previously mentioned, the main public building acts as public square surrounded by the various activations inspired by the artistic impulse of the design. The building is meant to intensify the sense of the village through clusters of closed spaces shaped like fragments of traditional buildings connected by a central open square surrounded by glass. The fragments of traditional building are made through a standardized module that is combined using various schemes to make larger volumes to serve different functions. On the ground floor the open space functions as an exhibition space surrounded by various services. The first floor follows the same principle with more private closed workshops and instruction spaces surrounded by a mezzanine used as an open studio space for artistic exploration. The layered composition intensifies the experience of the village visually through playfulness and the contrast of solid and void. The arrangement of spaces also functionally fits the notion of the public square through a clear hierarchy of open and semi-open areas that encourage movement and social interaction. The vertical circulation in the building surrounds the central square passing by all the activations in the building and ending on a walkable green roof that provides a visual connection towards the historical village.

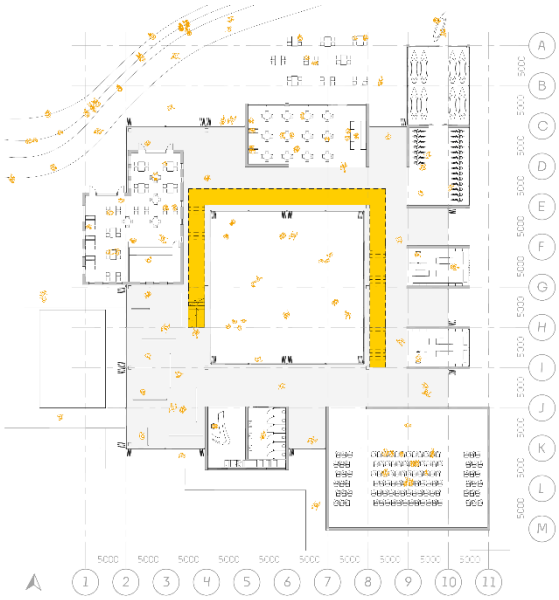

Figure 12 Ground floorplan

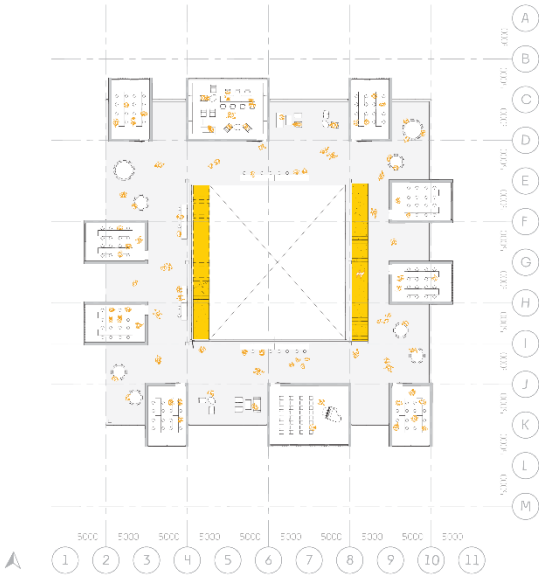

Figure 11 First floorplan

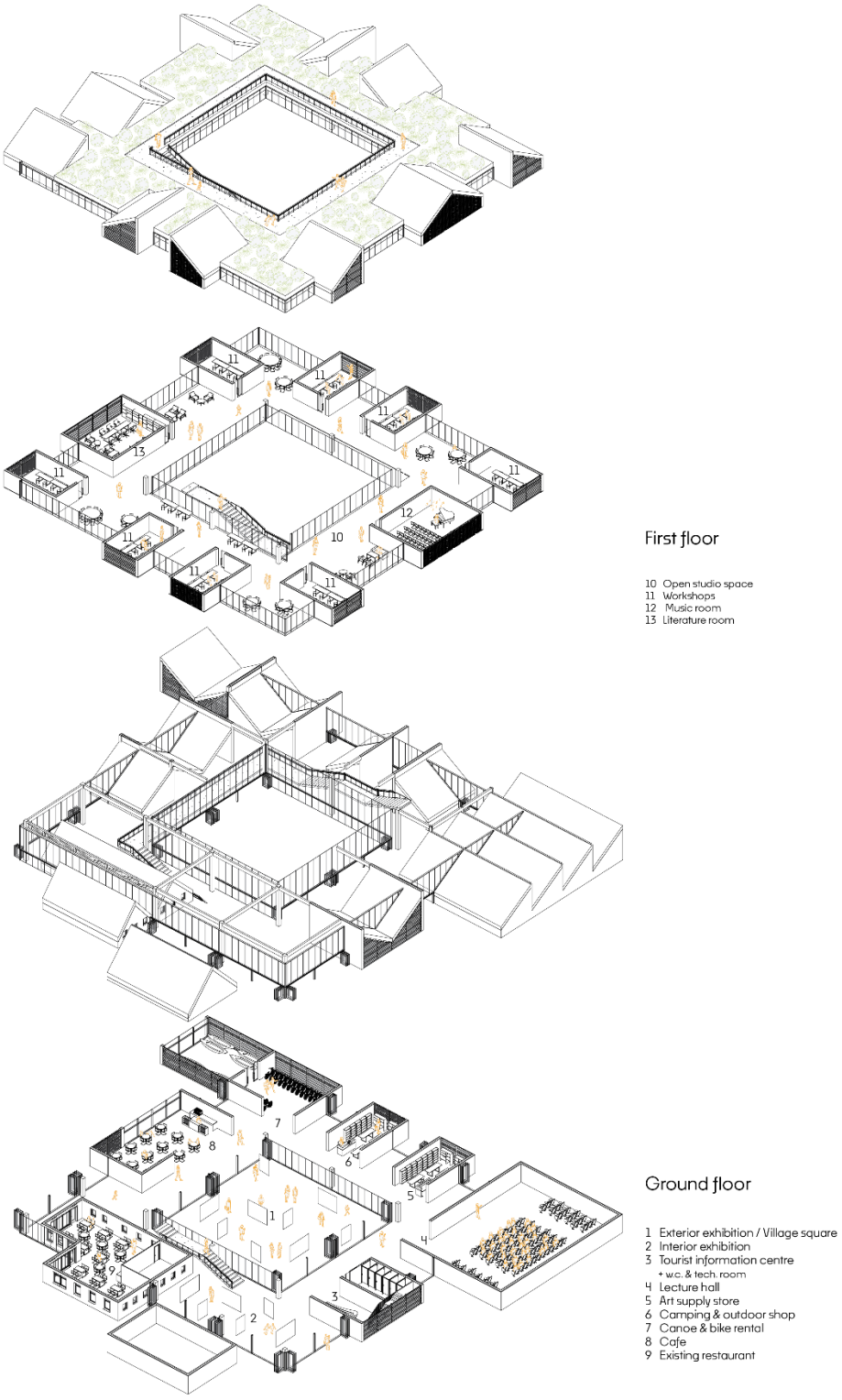

Figure 13 Axonometric organizational drawing



Figure 14 Interior impression



Figure 15 Exterior night impression



Figure 16 East elevation

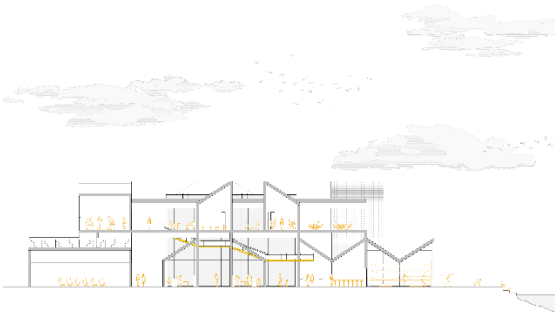

Figure 17 Section

Conclusion

This project explored various possibilities and methods of incorporating art as a tool for design and as a cultural bridge that can connect the historical and landscape heritage of Groningen to boost tourism and economic prosperity. There were many benefits to using art as a guide to this design as it provided a strong program that can engage both tourists and locals. Since locals can exchange their creative endeavors with visitors and use it to express their heritage and culture through workshops and exhibitions from which they can generate revenue. Moreover, they can also engage as participants alongside the tourists, encouraging more social interactions and reducing annoyance. This program also expands the demographic of tourists to still include the existing types of tourists while adding a group of art enthusiasts that can compliment them. Together with year-round activations, this allows for a more dispersed and slower tourism, therefore ensuring both economic prosperity while minimizing disturbance to locals and rather providing them with benefits including employment, investment in local infrastructure and facilities and cultural exchange.

This use of art as inspiration was incorporated into the design to enhance user's experiences of the spaces within and around the site through intensification. This intensification concept guiding the design emerged directly from the approach of de Ploeg in interpreting the Groningen landscapes and cityscapes. Similarly to the effect of the paintings on the viewer, designing a heightened experience of space is done in order to elicit greater emotion and engagement and provide a strong impression. This reveals an unexploited potential of the spaces and makes it more apparent. This can also be used as a tool to promote the surrounding tourism as experiencing these various intensified landscapes can encourage users to explore further by offering a glimpse into the experiences in the rest of the region of Groningen.

This design explored how art can be translated into architecture to enhance designs. Overall, it was revealed to be more beneficial to get down to the essence of the form of art, including their goals, what experiences they produce and how. Then applying that into architectural design as this design approach creates a more subtle reference to art which might not be immediately recognized but can be experienced. In contrast to the imitating of shapes, colors and superficial aspects of art as that approach doesn't always directly translate the same in a spatial context such as architecture.

Implications and recommendations

The user experience of space is already a guiding principle of architectural design, however approaching it from the lens of art was found to provide an additional layer of depth to the design.

Art can provide architecture with a wider variation of approaches to creating a stronger emotional experience as it is not limited by as many considerations as architecture, since

the main goal of art is often to provoke emotions. Therefore, the intensification of experience through approaches and methods found in art can be beneficial way to view design in a more creative and flexible manner. This project explored art mainly through a specific style and group creating the guiding concept of intensification. However, the possibilities are endless in ways that architecture can reinterpret art as each art form and artist provides a different approach and goal that can be used to guide architecture.

Reflection and process

The process of using art as inspiration for a design was very challenging as art is extremely subjective and can be experienced differently depending on the viewer's perspective and approach. Therefore, this makes it easier to imitate than to truly understand as done in the first design approach. This process, however, revealed a way of interpreting design through the lens of an artist to the landscape and transform this imagination into reality through architectural design tools.

The design process including both approaches of imitating and utilizing the essence of the art style was beneficial in highlighting the differences between them, in terms of the connection to the context, culture and the experiences that each of them created. Therefore, the final design became successful in reflecting the values of de Ploeg and of their art through intensification of the existing and highlighting unexploited potential in the site which is representative of the region from the landscapes, cityscapes and water connections.

For future development, the process of design can be enhanced further by additional exploration into the use of the landscape design of the surrounding to enhance the design and create a more cohesive and harmonious landscape where the building and the landscape can flow better together. This can be done by defining the zones made in the landscape in more detail and blurring the lines to make them flow together as part of one wholistic design rather than separate zones.

Overall, the design process produced a suitable potential solution to be incorporated within the Nij Begun strategy to revitalize the region through a strong program, increased economic opportunities and an approach of highlighting the value of what is already existing through intensification and creating experiences to provoke emotions.

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