P5 Reflection
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“Moving elements in the city, and in particular people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical part. Nearly every sense is in operation, and the image is the composite of them all.”

Kevin Lynch, The image of the city

This quote of Kevin Lynch is the intellectual jump-off for our research. Initially we started researching Rotterdam not from its terra firma, but more of the ever-shifting experience of the city. We tried to pry into the minds of the residents via questionnaires, and to explicit out own feelings during the walks of the city. During this research we gradually perceived the lack of legibility of Rotterdam, especially to non-residents, but also to residents themselves. When asked to draw a map of their neighbourhood, all interviewees drew different areas. The borders of the greater area are clear in the form of big roads and water masses, but the perceived boundaries greatly vary (fig. 1).

![Fig. 1. Perceived neighbourhood boundaries by inhabitants of the Sint Jacobsplaats, Rotterdam](image)

However, after this ‘softer’ research of the inner city and Sint Jacobsplaats, we found that the phenomenological approach was restraining us in finding the true reasons for the ambiguous readings of Rotterdam. We had unreeled the psyche of the city, but as true psychoanalysts we had to now delve into the history of our patient. Rotterdam is a traumatized city. It is, even a lifetime later, recovering from the damage the Germans did on May 14th 1940. From a typo-morphologically oriented approach we could further analyse the city. Especially for Rotterdam this historic approach was very rewarding. The traditional city model holds very little ground in Rotterdam. Delving into literature, reading Krier, Gehl, Koolhaas, Barbieri and Castex, I came to understand the importance of post-war Rotterdam as architectural playground for the functionalists. These experiments reinterpreted the entrenched typologies and have been valuable for all contemporary building practices. However, introduced in a razed city, they form a very radical break from the generic Dutch city. The result was the oxymoron of Dutch Americaneity. A city that wanted to welcome the car, but simultaneously clang to the Dutch identity after the liberation of the Germans.

The results are inflicting problems in three ways. They are pushing the boundaries between public and private with the introduction of dubious semi-public zones (like in the Kasbah or the ‘expeditiehaven’). These zones create a shadow network of semi-public places, distorting the legibility.

Secondly the functionalist buildings don’t keep to the classical framework of traditional streets, squares and building blocks. They appropriate the free space as autonomous enclaves. Whereas the pre-war buildings de-
fined and were defined by the street, the post-war experiments diffuse and dissolve them. The result is a very ambiguous city.

Thirdly, the functionalists' focus on monofunctionality still lingers on in contemporary Rotterdam. Buildings for commercial use, like the Lijnbaan, are highly efficient consumerist traps, but allow for very little life outside shopping hours. Counts show that squares and streets in the city centre are emptier than in other cities, especially at night time. This problematic, shredded public sphere leads to an indistinctive and illegible environment, giving rise to unsafe places and a flattening of human experience. Furthermore, the dwellings functions as autonomous and fortified organism, swallowing their residents via one access point and transporting them to their respective capsules via interior circulation systems, resulting in streets that have solely become transportation routes but leave no places for stay.

To fully fathom the meaning of history and its developments and to combine it with the accounts of our interviewees took me a long time. The interaction between design and research had been devoid of a proper understanding of the importance of reinstating a clear hierarchy at the site until my P3. At this point I started to both realise the strength and limitations of the site. After my P3 I rigorously changed my design to make it more apt to the situation.

My current design proposal listens better to the unspoken needs of the people of Rotterdam, their voicing for boundaries, for legibility, and for hierarchy of public and private. The design aims to reinstall the classical order of streets, squares and urban blocks, as propagated by Gehl and Krier, but in way that doesn't negate the lessons learned from modernism. It's no negation, no anti-thesis, of recent history, it tries to embrace both classical and modern traditions. It tries to reinstall the classical building block typology, but simultaneously – like the structuralists- breaks it down into pieces, forming single ‘families' of urban villas. The result is, when walking on the traintunnel, a series of stroboscopic flashes into the interior of the block, allowing to look into the ‘hofje'-like core, invoking visual but not so much physical participation, and allowing control over the interior by the residents. Vice versa, allowing the terraced perimeter block to keep their Corbusian dream of light, air and space.

The urban villa's allow for activation of the street. The villa's have public functions facing the route on the ramp, activating the route during the day. The dwellings on the top and 'hofje' side will generate an atmosphere of control and liveliness during night times. The access of the villa's read as a reinterpretation of the 'portiekwoning', allowing a wide variety in access types and a variety in dwelling types. Like the Parisian boulevard block it allows different social classes to live together under one roof (fig. 2).

The tower, located at the north end of the block, answers in a very Miesian way to the site. Like the Seagram building or the Nationalgalerie, it steps back, allowing for an elevated public platform in front of it. Like the Greek and Roman temples that used to be raised by 1,5m, the tower creates it's own space, allowing it to stand like an autonomous highrise in the city, but simultaneously, almost unnoticeably, connecting at the base with the existing. The height difference enables an ambiguous reading of the base. As seen from the Goudse Singel it forms the building entrance and continuation of the building alignment of the perimeter block, from the other side, at the top of the tunnel, the roof is a public square in front of a tower. This allows a continuous urban block on a more human scale.

The choice for the program of the tower, we didn't get a program of demands, stems from the appealing social condensing function architecture can generate. The chosen functions aim to bring people together.

The tower houses public functions at the bottom floors. Making these floors into areas of public action and display, a continuous parade of personalities and bodies. At the lowest floor, hidden in the intimate and dark
base of the tower, a public bathhouse is situated. It forms a space of informal meeting, like it has been over the centuries in Christian and Islamic cultures. It forms a central meeting ground on both a neighbourhood and city scale, between residents and visitors, between Muslims and Christians, creating a synthesis between people.

The next level, connecting to the street level of the public platform, we find the Idea Store. This place is a combination of retail and leisure. Very much like modern coffee places, it is no longer just a place to have a coffee, but a place to hang-out, a place to swap ideas, to meet people, to see people. It is the next level community house. It is the future of the library as a place of meeting in an informal atmosphere. A place to swap knowledge and have publicly accessible internet and computers. It is the library as its symbolic role of to the persistent desire for collectivity.

The levels on top are places to stay, places of temporal and fixed residence. A stacking of private capsules in an L-shape along shared public areas. Via a seemingly generic floorplan, collective places, corridors and private capsules are created. For this part of the building Christopher Alexander’s *Pattern Language* proved to be invaluable. The following rules were especially informative for my design.

129. **Communal areas in the center**
Provide for every social group a shares space. Locate this space in the pith of all spaces that the group uses in such a way that all routes cross it.

133. **The stairs as a stage**
Stairs are not just some aid to traverse a height difference. The stairs are part of the space itself, a volume, a spatial part of the building, and unless this space is brought to life, she will stay a dead corner and disconnect the building.

135. **Play of light and dark**
Create differences in light intensity throughout the building in such away that people, being phototropic creatures, automatically walk to important places when they walk to the light; seatings, entrances, special places.

![Fig. 2. Texier, Tableaux de Paris. Multiple classes live together in a building.](image)
Make other places darker to increase the contrast. Make the light spaces a destination in itself.

In hindsight the possibility to choose your own program is both advantage and burden. Connecting all functions in a single building proved to be a difficult task. Functions need to be able to function separately, but also need proper accessibility. For a long time the public bathhouse was located at the top, being more of a spa for the hotel guests in the tower. Changing it to the lower floor creates a totally different reading of the function. It no longer was this place for the luxurious. It implied actual participation of the function in the city as a whole as a social connector.