Global research shows that two thirds of the total world population is expected to live in cities by 2050. The urban tranquility is currently under intense pressure, partly due to the increasing density. In addition to including collective parochial spaces, the city is filling up more and more with private accommodation and thus losing high-quality country where they come together. This increases the feeling of loneliness and anxiety disorders and mental breakdowns among people living in the city. I started with these two elements; how can I create a point of peace and encounter in the city?

In the beginning of my research I investigated cemeteries for their soft elements. The literal interpretation of a cemetery in the middle of the urban fabric would be interesting, but I finally came to the conclusion that these places are more likely to cause a meeting with their lost ones than with each other. The place that I wanted to design was not directly related to death, but to the piece of identity, consciousness and tranquility. It helped me to discover the values I wanted to add with soft city in Rotterdam. Just like a cemetery has always been designed with different types of places that encourage you to stand still for a moment, due to the special planting, symbolic lines and small places.

For devising and designing a methodology and toolbox, I have also studied literature. I went further than Gehl’s Toolbox that he created for the human city. Gehl’s tools are hard criteria that can be very useful for analysis, but Soft City goes further than Gehl’s toolbox.

Soft spots are spontaneous places that invite residents, not force them, to shape them according to their own program. These places are difficult to define in a form, they show themselves in different forms such as a sidewalks, balconies, squares, stairwells and benches. For my analysis I therefore made prints of the important meeting places in the neighborhood. I have highlighted the soft elements herein, and in this way show the hardness (fixed) and softness (changeable, inviting to meet and just be) a certain place. It is a new way of looking at the city, to name these elements and to be able to explain the softness or hardness.

To translate the literature into the real world I have studied the Bospolder/Tussendijken district. Botu is known as one of the poorest neighborhoods in the Netherlands. The neighborhood is in the news a lot because of crime. With the municipal vision Botu 2028, the main objective is to raise the social index of the neighborhood with the residents. This makes it an ideal design location for my research and design.

From the first moment I walked around the neighborhood, I noticed how much the neighborhood lacked places that were "soft"; places that invite change, offer some peace in the busy city and invite you to spontaneous. An important trigger was Proefpark de Punt, an important soft city space, which had to make room for yet an extra housing project which increased the density in the area. The different backgrounds sometimes made interviewing more difficult, there were some people who could not speak Dutch. In addition, many investigations have already been carried out by various authorities in this district, which has made the district ‘research tired’. This sometimes caused irritation because, according to them, the information was apparently not well communicated between several research parties. Yet most of the people I spoke to were friendly and willing to share their views on the ins and outs of the neighborhood.

During my research I came to the conclusion that every place contains soft and hard elements. Hard spots are also not directly negative; without hard architecture, soft architecture is not viable. It’s about the balance between hard and soft architecture. By testing the spots against a hard / soft diagram, I was able to conclude and argue that there was an imbalance in hard spots and soft spots in Botu.
As a result, I have chosen three places of different scales that were interesting to add soft city; the heart of Botu the Visserijplein, a smaller square Schipperstraat and the smallest intervention in the Wijde alley.

With the research into the Soft City, I have developed a new form of architecture that adapts to the tendency of people and time. It is manufactural and degradable. There is something irrevocable in architecture; once it stands it is a finished product. The modular system that I designed is suitable for various activities and implementation. This has made it a modular system that can be assembled by the citizens themselves from the neighborhood. Moreover, it can be applied in other problem neighborhoods, where it can improve meeting and peace in cities through a different function.