How do public toilets during festive events in Maastricht reflect the city’s social structure?

Report 2

Account of the social environment of the design site

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Introduction

Figure 1: Site location in Maastricht (Author's own)
The second report looks into the chosen design site and its immediate context, in order to understand the current use of the area and its social environment. This effort will gauge how the design proposal will fit, and if there are any clashes of function arising.

My current proposed project is focused on turning the Jeker River into a prominent water feature of the city, by transforming a hidden site into a river oasis, with a small bathhouse and public toilets complex. I plan on exploiting the natural features of the site and making the river accessible to the public, whilst providing the city with some much needed facilities.

Description of the site

The site sits in the southern part of the centre of Maastricht, in the district of Jekerkwartier (Fig. 1). It is adjacent to the block known as Looiershof, but is clearly cut off from it by a medieval wall. The northern arm of the Jeker River runs through it, flowing eastwards, in one of the few instances along its path where it is not hidden underneath roads or buildings. The Jeker flows at a depth of approximately 3.5 m below the site levels. A villa built around the year 2000 directly on the river currently occupies the eastern side of the site, with its garage, lawns and terraces spreading westwards on both sides of the Jeker. The narrow strip of land, at the western edge of the site currently has a very overgrown appearance, with abundant vegetation and a few mature and young trees. The arches of the 13th century medieval wall, which forms the east and south boundaries, are an important part of the sites character.

Figure 2: Panoramic photograph of the site taken from it’s north-western end (Author’s own)
Building use and demographic analysis of the neighbourhood

The site is found on the northern part of the Jekerkwartier neighbourhood, in an area also known as the Latin Quarter because of the high number of education institutions present, several of which are its immediate neighbours: The Jan van Eyck Academy and the Theatre Academy (Fig. 3). The historic district also has a number of old churches, monasteries and residential buildings, numbering 1,541 inhabitants. It has many small art galleries too, as well as restaurants, café and eateries serving both tourists and a returning clientele made out of the student population.

1 nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jekerkwartier
The river Jeker is an important element of the district. Originally, it consisted of a number of branches flowing in an inconsistent manner, which later determined the urban plan of the district. The area used to have an industrial character, with many tanneries based on the Jeker. However, the last remnants of this industrial character – the Noodle factory, located just south of the wall – were demolished two years previously to make way for a new residential development. The service sector and small scale retail replaced the industry in the last couple of decades, with small shops, restaurants, cafes and boutique hotels now making up most of the area’s employers. Figure 4 shows there are a number of retail venues and eating and drinking establishments in the area, as well as private art galleries. Personal observations and discussions with local students concluded that the bars and cafes are popular student destinations in the area for their close proximity to the higher education institutions – for example, De Tribunal café, on the corner of the Theatre Academy. At the same time, interviews with shoppers and tourists proved that people coming to Maastricht for short stays – either from other parts of the Netherlands or from Belgium – frequent the boutiques and local shops. Tourists also visit the area for its narrow picturesque streets and historical walls and buildings.

Although mainly concentrated on the western part of Jekerkwartier, the large student population also frequents the area surrounding the site for its eateries, student centres and galleries. To give an idea of student numbers, the Toneelacademie, which forms the NW boundary of the site, currently has 100-120 students, with international students also coming to the academy for extra workshops or exchange programmes. The PhD programme of the van Eyck Academy, to the site’s west, boasted 39 students in 2013. However, the numbers of building users are actually higher, as the academy also has a library, a print shop, and a number of labs and artist studios, and offers a wide range of programmes of international exchange, workshops and lectures. At the same time, the biggest higher education institution in the city – the University of Maastricht – whose buildings can be found all over in Jekerkwartier, had a total number of almost 17,000 students in the year 2016. Its campus is spread around the area, with both educational facilities and administrative offices located close to the site (Fig. 4).

The uses map of the context, however, shows that the main building use in the immediate vicinity of the design site is residential, with a great number of houses and small-scale apartment blocks. The predominant typology is that of single-family dwellings or apartments in terraced houses. This typology, along with the central location of the district and the well-kept appearance of the houses, indicates that the local population living here is reasonably well-off. In fact, the land owned by the dwelling currently occupying the site has a total area of around 1,000 sqm, with the building featuring three extensive levels, an underground garage and a number of gardens and terraces on different levels, connected by a footbridge over the Jeker. At the same time, the number of communal blocks or social housing estates is not high. Moreover, the Looiershof development in the south of the site, expected to be completed in 2019, will feature 35 luxury homes and an underground car park. The two main entrances for this new development are actually in the SW and E of the design site. The numbers of residents in the immediate context, therefore, are forecast to increase in the near future.

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2 www.looiershof.com/voormalige-vermicellifabriek
3 www.jekerkwartier.com
4 www.toneelacademie.nl/EN
5 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Van_Eyck_Academie
6 www.maastrichtuniversity.nl
7 www.google.nl/maps
8 www.looiershof.com/looiershof1
Figure 4: Usage map of the area around the site (Author’s own)

Legend

- Residential
- Educational
- Food and drink establishments
- Retail
- Art Galleries
- Cultural Institutions
- Cultural Landmarks
- Hotels
- Hostels
- Administrative NGOs
- Businesses
- Offices
Analysis of the design proposal in the social context of the neighbourhood

When it comes to addressing the desires of certain groups in the neighbourhood, one art book project can potentially shed some light on my proposal of revealing the forgotten Jeker river and making it into a public place is in the consciousness of the local people living in the area. The artist in residence at the van Eyck Academy in 1999 undertook a photographic project about the Jeker River with the residents of Grote Looierstraat. After archival research and initial discussions, artist Maria Thereza Alves discovered that one of the original branches of the River flowed through what is now the tree-lined Grote Looierstraat. In The Reflection of My Neighbour’s Window, Alves imagined the street as a river once again, by photographing the reflection of a few personal objects from the Grote Looierstraat residents in an open strand of the Jeker, as their neighbours living opposite would see them. The project, although highly conceptual in nature, did reveal the locals’ nostalgia and longing for the street currently packed with cars to be returned to its early 1900s form of open river. One neighbourhood project mentioned in the book which accompanied the art piece is title “The Uncovering of the River Jeker” and, although I cannot find any recent information on it, it does show that there is a desire to not only rediscover and reveal the hidden river, but actively make the most of its urbanistic and relaxing qualities.\(^9\) It is clear that the covering and containment of the Jeker, although serving a need 100 years ago, is now bemoaned by the local people who have a romantic idea of strolls along public canals and the sound of the flowing river passing by their windows. The sewage function of the Jeker is long gone, and the river has been cleaned in recent decades, so it is viable – and clearly desired – to see it become a public amenity.

Although a general proposed idea of bringing the Jeker back in the urban context for public use seems to have a positive impact in theory, in practice, the particularities of the site’s context might unveil some potential conflicts of interests when it come to uses. The problem arises when a completely new function – leisure – through the design of a bathhouse might clash with the predominantly residential and academic function of the neighbouring urban environment. At the same time, proposing public toilets in the residential context might also bring some conflict.

The urban situation and demographics of the neighbourhood, as well as the particularities of the location, give the proposal site a very hidden character. Although it sits in a popular student and tourist area, the site is wedged between houses and the new residential development. The east access to the site is at the end of a quiet and secluded residential street that not regularly used by locals, whilst the wall borders the other end. What attracted me to the site originally was its “secret garden” qualities, its lush vegetation and gently flowing stream hidden from the casual passer-by. It seems almost forgotten, an island of nature and parkland in the heart of built-up Maastricht. Although I find the villa on the site exaggeratedly big and over-manicured, its gardens make good use of the change of levels between the ground floor and the river, with an intricate system of underground and overground terraces and bridges, invisible from the street. The site is however slightly overlooked from the narrow street to its west, which is a regularly used thoroughfare. Moreover, the open-air auditorium of the Theatre academy also overlooks the western end.

Although the Alves art project proved there is a desire to make more of the Jeker water feature, a potential conflict of interests could arise if the new use of the site as public bathhouse brings a very high number of visitors to what is essentially a quiet residential area. Although relatively large numbers of visitors (students, tourists) do frequent the area, there is not a specific point of interest in the immediate vicinity. The design proposal, although very much understated, has the potential to become a local landmark (especially with the introduction of public toilets), so it is important that the visitor numbers attracted by it do not disturb the peace and quiet of the adjacent residences, or clash with the academic nature of the environment.

\(^9\) Alves 2000
The challenge is to make this site a popular attraction without ruining its hidden character or disturbing the current uses of the site. A solution to tackle the overlooking issue could be to make the proposed building ignore its context by turning it inwards, and insulating it from its surroundings through the design and spatial arrangements of facilities. This might work with the bathhouse, but such a solution clashes with the inherent public nature of city toilet provision; the point of the public aspect of the building – its toilet facilities – is that people are able to use the buildings whenever the need arises, or whenever they require freshening up. This contradiction in the public/hidden character of the design is a challenge that needs resolving.

When it comes to the tourism potential of the proposal, the area is known for being a quiet and subdued district, liked for the relaxing strolls down the cobbled streets or in the park. A bathhouse, therefore, could add to the relaxation use if the site, and could be seen as the final destination after a day of shopping. Combining the needs of the tourists with those of the locals can potentially inform the operation system of the bathhouse: it could be free to use for residents of Maastricht and students during the week, and only accessible to visitors and foreigners during the weekend, for example, in exchange of a fee. Furthermore, addressing the predominantly academic character of the district, the bathhouse can be aimed at attracting students and other young people. A student bathhouse could feature longer opening hours, allow for larger groups of people, and also feature a café or a bar.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the current situation and aspect of the site makes it an extraordinary and unique urban gem in the heart of Maastricht. Although currently under-used, the site has the potential to be activated by an intervention which would bring the public in and turn the River Jeker into an urban amenity, whilst also maintaining its hidden character. The proposed programme of the design, featuring a bathhouse along with public toilets and other facilities, represents this dichotomy between hidden and public. The district where the site is found also tackles the contrast of usage, combining quiet streets of small residential buildings with places of interests for tourists and an extended university campus. The challenges of the design, centre on making the building an attractive landmark in the city, whilst also respecting its immediate neighbours.

Figure 5: Photograph of the site taken from west wall. The Theatre Academy and its outdoor auditorium are visible on the left (Marianne Boonekamp).
References

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