Welcoming Gentrification

Boosting future prospects of the Indische Buurt by connecting socioeconomic networks

My project builds upon the slowly evolving process of gentrification in the Indische Buurt in Amsterdam East. The project starts with a general strategy for the whole neighborhood with an underlying socioeconomic vision. Deriving from that strategy a series of four interventions in three building blocks is designed. I see my strategy as generic; it can be applied to other neighborhoods that are gentrifying and lacking the same qualities, on which I come back later, as the Indische Buurt. However, the translations that result in the interventions are very specific because they rely on a detailed analysis of the context.

In order to develop a strategy that results in an architectural intervention, it is important to understand how socioeconomic networks exist in the area and how they relate to public and private spaces. Key in this understanding is the anthropological meaning and the social identity of a place. What types of people utilize this place? How do they interact with the built environment? What are the qualities of the place and how can an intervention positively affect these?

Strategy and problem statement

The first residents who gave identity to the Indische Buurt in the 1910s were part of the working-class. As Amsterdam was expanding, new houses had to be built. From a social point of view planners tried to improve living standards by providing good and affordable social housing in the newly built areas. In the 1950s the first immigrants arrived and the neighborhood became multicultural. Like other prewar residential neighborhoods it deteriorated. Due to its negative figures on unemployment, education, income and criminality, this process of deterioration in the Indische Buurt eventually resulted in 2007 in receiving the label of a deprived neighborhood.

Today in 2013 we can see signs of improvement: gentrification. Houses built as social housing are being combined into larger apartments that are sold on the housing market. Streets have been renovated and cultural life is being activated. Trendy restaurants and bars pop up at squares and other public places. All these developments attract new people, the so-called YUPs. They are highly educated, are in the life phase of starting a family and prefer to live in a highly urbanized area.

This gentrification process correlates with the arrival of new residents and the improvement of public facilities. My strategy attempts to give extra profundity to this process by introducing new public services that are lacking for the new residents and that adapt to structural changes in our society. There are many changes visible in society but for my project I have chosen to focus on one significant societal change, namely the arrangement of the working week.

Figures show that especially the YUPs have a more small-scale and flexible way of doing business, and this trend seems to be most structural in Amsterdam. The so-called self-employees work in all branches and are entrepreneurs, one-man businesses, freelancers or other small-scale types of businesses. Due to the flexible and independent way of operating they demand other kinds of public facilities and workspaces compared to large companies that are accommodated in a regular office building. Exactly these elements are missing in the Indische Buurt which mainly exists of dwelling blocks. To create a well-balanced environment in which also economic activity takes on an important role, my project will focus on this missing program. This includes new workspaces and supporting services that facilitate small-scale economic activity. In this way the
economic activity is kept within the borders of the neighborhood itself, something all local residents benefit from. By facilitating new services, independent self-employees can go out for lunch, meet colleagues in a coffee corner or rent a presentation room; by doing that an economic synergy arises, which can result in employment and eventually in more self-sustaining families on local level.

Another societal change is that people nowadays look for rapprochement and have found a renewed appreciation for sharing things with each other. No longer status is derived from the possession of material things like a car or a workspace. Nowadays people take on a more pragmatic approach of material possession and discovered that sharing things is easier, cheaper and more fun. The 1990s were the decennium of consuming, social security and individualism, whereas dictated by the current economic crisis, people get more consciousness of self-reliance and community. So not only self-employees base their activities on collaboration, also outside the professional world there is an interest in collective citizenship. Notions among others like the collective ownership of expensive machines, the shared responsibility of your childcare and the communal maintenance of collective space, form the spine of the proposed interventions. Besides the building itself, the intervention attempts to positively affect the surrounding context.

**Proposals**

Before explaining the proposals separately, I would like to point out, besides the strategy, what the common thoughts are regarding my design attitude.

All interventions are proposed within the building block and therefore rely on the taken position towards the blending or not blending with the context. This also counts for the program that has to merge with the existing program and other characteristics of the block. In case of the building envelope the proposals attempt to unite with the surrounding context whereas a contrast is sought regarding the materiality. The materials articulate the identity of the building and its use rather than seeking for a dialogue with the surrounding. In my opinion the strategy as acupuncture as method gains strength when the interventions have a certain degree of autonomously in order to maximize the effect as catalyst.

Looking at the built urban structure of the Indische Buurt, much advantage can be gained by readdressing the arrangement of public, collective, private spaces and all the grey areas in between. This is most interesting when actually intervening in the block itself. Superimposing new volumes on tactic positions, if needed with a minimal lost of the existing program, could readdress the appropriation of space and meanwhile improve the built structure of the block. One condition that should be respected with all interventions is the presence of current residents and their privacy.
At the north side of playground Batavia an underpass runs from the Djakarta Terrace towards the shopping street Molukkenstraat. Both the alley and the underpass are smelly and feel unsafe because the place lacks activity. By replacing the one story high storage with a high slender volume that guides pedestrians and cyclists through the alley, the intervention attempts to make the route safer and the living conditions for the neighbors more attractive.

The changing direction of the façade openings plays a role in that guidance. The active plinth on the long side, also active in the evenings, provides a sense of safety for the underpass users. Perpendicular on the plinth the first and second floor open up on the short side giving the building its presence from further down the street. Another reason for the twisting of the façade openings is the exposure to direct sunlight; the darker ground floor gets maximum exposure whereas the program on the upper floor require minimal direct sunlight.

On the upper floors private atelier spaces add new program to the neighborhood. They are connected to the ground floor where a Fablab, which is a creative place for experiments, is located. Expensive machine like 3d printers, laser cutters and milling devices are shared by professionals, students, children and workshop groups to build prototypes.

The roof terraces can be utilized by all building users but also by the neighbors as compensation for the loss of their balcony. The staircase that is the connection between the street, Fablab, ateliers and adjacent homes, functions independently so all private spaces can be locked when desired.
Within the Batavia block a lively courtyard is situated with social functions like a supervised playground for children and a community house used by a variety of (groups of) people. The courtyard is strongly capped by stonewalls separating the private gardens from the playground. As a reaction on the current hard rectangular shapes of the courtyard, the proposals offers softer curved shapes that appear more child-friendly.

The interesting mix of people that make use of the courtyard is currently causing a conflict. Where the playground closes at 17 o’clock, the community house must be accessible in the evening so people can gather. A steel fence separates the two entrances, which makes the entrance chaotic and unattractive. Part of the intervention is the restructuring of this public space to solve the conflicting situation. A sculpture separates the entrances without a high fence, creates a small terrace in front of the community house, while replacing the storage shed and providing a rest place around an existing tree at the play field. Besides an existing play field and playground for older children, the new program adds a playground for children between 0-4 years.

The choice to position a childcare in a safe enclosed courtyard with already a similar function was an obvious one. How the childcare aims to operate is less common. Instead of being institutionalized this childcare rents out units to groups of parents that organize the daycare with each other, independently and outside the established childcare system. Every group has a private bedroom at the back of the building, a half-open group room in the middle and a shared playroom at the front façade with access to the outdoor playground. The separations between the group rooms are just enough for children to feel enclosed, whereas babysitters can oversee the area and supervise each other's children as well. The round cocoons are deepened to give an extra sense of safeness.

In reference to a blanket, the roof construction of curved laminated beams is draped around the geometrical shape. The hard shell on the exterior and the soft inside gradually gain height towards the front façade where daylight is present and public life takes place. Seen from the surrounding homes, the effect of a visual inversion makes the roof surface appear as an solid steel mesh, whereas from the inside the view through the roof lights is almost completely transparent.
Jan Ernst van der Pek was an architect that has influenced the thoughts on public housing by designing several blocks in Amsterdam. Probably his most iconic housing block, which encloses his name and is a listed national monument, was designed in 1911 in the oldest part of the Indische Buurt near Javaplein. Intervening in this national monument can only be successful when the context is understood and the intervention is sensible to that. The architectural and cultural historical value of this national monument derives from the special typology: it was the first half-open block built in The Netherlands after the housing law of 1901. The decision to build this typology was the result of a failed project a few years earlier in Eindhoven. Van der Pek had designed the courtyard as a public space, which undesirably resulted in a neglected space. Learning from this failure he decided to made a collective courtyard in the Indische Buurt and he introduced two guardhouses with a fence at the street side. The supervisor maintained the garden, was a handyman and kept an eye on sloppy people. The garden has always been accessible exclusively via the guardhouses; the residents could not even access it through their private gardens.

Like the Berlage Blocks across the street there were new volumes attached to the original design in the 1930s. Therefore the typologies (half-open block and free standing blocks) became less clearly defined, while the ensemble as typology represents its special value. To define where the Van der Pek block ends, I propose a new volume. It will face the collective garden en take over the scale of the guardhouses at the other side of the garden. As a gesture towards the Bouwfondsblok situated in the back of the building, the design leaves open an option to develop their collective garden. In that case the Study can be utilized as a gatehouse.

The mass of the building, and some of the ornamental elements are currently responding more clearly to the existing architecture than the materialization does. The greenish granite cladding and bleak interior with concrete and wood mainly responds to the use of the building and articulates a different time of construction.

The central porch provides separate access to the meeting rooms, reading room and study floor. The building will be open at a daily basis and the opening hours can relate to the use of the guardhouses, which are currently temporarily in use by an artist. In the weekends community events can take place. A reintroduction of the theater like in the 1950’s can give the garden back its social function.
In the 1970s two dwelling blocks between the Insulindeweg as main infrastructure line in the neighborhood, and Obi Square were replace by one large block with a collective garden within the block. In my proposal six existing dwelling blocks are being replaced by a new volume that divides the collective garden into two semi-public courtyards and one public square. This creates potential to design a courtyard with a better shape and users functions. The courtyards have a domestic character with wooden platforms, benches, bicycle parking, and reserved places for community purposes where, for instance children can decide to maintain a butterfly garden. The square has a urban character with pavement, fountains and trees.

The new volume links the infrastructure of the Insulindeweg with the public facilities surrounding the Obi- and Ambon square, while breaking with the monotonous typologies and architecture of the area.

Basically the intervention has three layers, which are vertically and horizontally connected through several porches. The idea of more transparency is also carried through in the existing porches, which are widened and prepared with two glass doors.

The first layer is the public layer that connects the public spaces with the public plinth. A coffee corner with meeting rooms is located at the Insulindeweg, large work units in between the courtyards, and a business hotel lobby, grand café, restaurant and shops are located at the square.

The second layer is the apartment layer that replaces social housing with a more luxurious type of apartment. Also the hotel rooms are integrated in this layer. The floor plans have a solid core containing the toilet, bathroom and kitchen, enabling future user to alternate and specify the rest of the space. The third layer will offer workspaces that are also built-up generically. On top of the building with a view over the neighborhood, self-employees from the block or from the neighborhood can rent a workspace. The roof landscape is solely structured with the necessary element like columns, a roof and a façade. Within that structure a maximum flexibility can be achieved. A setback of the façade creates a promenade and a overhanging roof that clearly defines what is new and old.