To Read without words
Exploring Rotterdam Cool district.

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Seminar research methods and results
02) District

06) Three areas with a distinct morphological block typology.

Post modern

Post-war, modernism

Pre-war urban fabric
Not knowing the user, is it possible to design? This text elaborates on how, by whom, and why a district is used. How to read city blocks, and their relation to daily life. The ability to read the social environment and the possibility to address its user by design. The context of this text writes about this idea of reading the city by means of exploring the city, Rotterdam Cool district has been explored to test this manner of reading the city.

For this perceptual research manner the notion made by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter has to be mentioned before the journey starts; The neutral observer is surely a critical fiction, if among the multiplicity of phenomena with which we are surrounded we observe what we wish to observe, if our judgments are inherently selective because of the quantity of factual information is finally indigestible, any literal usage of a ‘neutral’ grid labours under approximate problems.¹

Entering Rotterdam city, reading context.

Scale is first to be related to, as using the car to enter a dense urban area like Rotterdam is no longer feasible, I arrive by train. The station, is still under construction but it already elaborates on where I am and with who I am. A metropolitan gate, aces to a great amount of destination, speed, no one stands still, everyone knows where he is and where he is to be going. As the station district is still in development it does not speak truthfully of its context yet. The built surrounding does, so I enter the city centre following the directions of its entities.

Rotterdam city centre might seem unclear, but its rational setup makes it easy to understand, filter the subjective and an understanding is gained. For example, loosing track of your trajectory in Amsterdam is much easier than loosing it in Rotterdam². The district that will be explored is set of by clear borders, the Wena, the Coolsingel, the Blaak and the Mauritweg.³ It is set up in a grid, dating before the Second World War, partly refilled according to the modern plan of van Traa.

Post-modern urban blocks

The high rise dominates as I leave the train station and cross the junction in front of it, to the left, offices in the Delftse Poort, and right in front the Manhattan hotel. Closer to the cantilevered pathway, I am led into the city block extracting me from world above the second floor. Guided by the cantilevered path, I’m inclined to enter the block through a passage. This is where retail rules, advertisements draw the attention while I follow the passage. On my way I pass an escalator piercing through the ground, facilitating the exit of an underground parking garage. The passage leads out on to the Kareldoornmanstraat.

The cantilevered side of the block is a very strong and commonly used tool in the urban blocks of Rotterdam. Together with the columns they create space in a blocks boarder, a grey area where the pedestrian is subtracted from the road, but he is still part of public life. It usually extends public life into the block by using shops. The passage is a second tool, one which allows access to a city block, and shows an inside perspective of the block to the public. Of course it can be discussed on what level the passage is still public space, but that discussion would not benefit the intention of this text.

These typological blocks have one more manner of connecting or de-connecting to daily life; the use of the service road. The service road is a collective road facilitating all the functions in the urban block. This part of the post-modern urban block has been extracted from the daily life of the Cooldistrict. The architectural language translates the back entrance of the block as a separated part of daily life. Clearly noticeable is the modernistic influence which can be seen as the founder of the service road.

¹ Rowe, C. Koetter, F. (1978), Collage City, Cambridg, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. P. 96
² Inbetween Amsterdams 1e radial canal (the Singel) dating back to the 15e century, the conditions of the more “natural” arized urban fabric dominates. A complex arrangement of streets and buildup follow the geographical conditions combined or interacting with human needs. Where as the Cool district of Rotterdam is set up by an more sophisticatated structure, comparable to the grid structure of Le Corbusier Plan Voisin.
³ Cantileverd pathway: a gallery or overhanging architecture, useually following the periphery of the urbanblock. ( see image nr. 05)
08) lijnbaanhoven vis a vis schouwburgplein
This first block can be seen in a broader perspective as one of the three morphological block typologies active in the district. These blocks have let the rules of modernism go and allowed a diversity of functions represented by diverse architectural entities. On block scale it could be seen as hybridism, as it facilitate diverse functions for diverse users at diverse moments during the day. But the quality of hybridism lay's in the possibility to exchange time, space and knowledge between these functions and users; mutual benefits and unexpected correlation.

These blocks are more like a collage, of mono-functional architectural entities, each facilitating their own transition from public to private life. They are an effect of the densification process of the city centre but they are not yet as Jane Jacobs promotes; complex arrangements of entities and functions serving the population. The underground parking and retail on ground level are the start for hybridism but the post-modern blocks show a clear disconnection between this lower level and the monofunctional entities above.

The Kareldoormanstraat leads to the Schouwburgplein, a square boxed in by theatres, a cinema and one side of the Lijnbaan haven.

A void vis a vis post-war urban blocks

Schouwburgplein is not the like the typical Dutch square, it has been raised two steps to literally create a public stage; the benches, lights and other structural elements have been directed towards the blind wall of the cinema. This neglecting the built side of the Lijnbaan haven, which is representative of the reconstruction period of Rotterdam after World War II and thus holds a strong monumental status for Rotterdam. In front of this side of the Lijnbaan haven public life is vivid, shops and bars open up to public life on the sidewalk whilst on top lay two stories of dwellings. The row of trees in front of the bars create an extra quality to the atmosphere, while the cycling lane in front of the sidewalk creates a clear boarder between the square and the bars. Just as the food stands on the opposite side of the cycling lane direct their attention towards the Lijnbaan haven instead of the square. A strong separation has been created between the old and the new, and the old holds a vivid public life while the square lacks public life.

This phenomenon can be seen as an indicator for possibilities. The public stage is clearly not the function that is stimulated by its own design nor by the setup of its surrounding context. The square shows that the Cool district is ready for integrated densification.

I continue my walk further into the heart of the city centre, following the famous Kortelijnbaan. A hardcore shopping street, two stories high with canopies above the first floor. Like a rollercoaster ride I get shot into the shopping street, a tunnel like experience, which has been directed towards a pre-war building, the city hall. But the shopping roller coaster has grasped my attention, I leave the square in front of the city hall as it is and continue to follow the shopping facilities on the lijnbaan. A short dazzling ride and I have already passed one junction and two city blocks.

Post-war urbanism and urban block configuration

The Lijnbaanhaven have been designed by van den Broek en Bakema, a modernist plan, where functions have been separated; light, air and space where clear nominators. This separation of functions is the essence of the success of the Lijnbaan. Because of the functional continuity, the user understands the Lijnbaan instantly. At every junction between the blocks blind corners make sure that nothing interesting is distracting the user from leaving the Lijnbaan.

In contradiction to the post-modern block which holds an ensemble of diverse buildings, the Lijnbaanhaven have a clear functional setup. This setup being a broken up U footprint letting light into the ensemble towards the dwellings; which have been separated from the retail by the use of a service road. As the Lijnbaan is famous it is also notorious, when the shops close the daily life changes quickly from pleasant to unpleasant.
12) Extension of Lijnbaan 1966

13) Ter meulen building with the linea nova designed by Ibelings van Tilburg architecten.
This dilemma of social, cultural and operating quality of the block has been addressed by Aldo Rossi⁵: “An urban artefact often causes it to become identified as a monument, and that a monument persists in the city both symbolically and physically”. This status can be adorned onto the Lijnbaan, a representative for the post-war reconstruction of Rotterdam. Rossi speaks about the ability of reading cities and the understanding of its structure, are we able to unravel the positions of disciplines that take precedence over others? Rossi revert to Poete’s hypothesis⁶; based on economic consideration that relate to the evolution of the city, an historical theory centred on the phenomenon of persistence. He rejects quality of this statement in the sense that it is based in the past; the persistence of an urban artefact is thus based on former importance and thus not always relevant to the present and future.

The municipality addressing the discontinuity in daily life
The municipality of Rotterdam made a plan⁷ to address this dilemma of the monumental status. The spatial setup will be used while keeping the architectural entities with their social and cultural value. The retail will be enlarged by connecting it to the first floors of the dwellings, and thus taking over of the former service roads. This way a connection will be created with the Lijnbaan and the core of the city block, vitalizing public life in the small parks of the blocks centre. Still this plan does not answer to the social problem of the Lijnbaans’ nightlife. It is even their intention to close all of the block to the public as soon as the shops close, thus creating a closed enclave at night. Will the social quality of the Rotterdam nightlife benefit or be pulled back down even further? This is not answered nor addressed by the plan.

Having passed two city blocks of retail, I am now standing in front of the junction with the Oldenbarneveldplein and the Lijnbaan. A physical disruption in the continuous plan of the Lijnbaan, a curved pavilion⁸, directs my attention away from the Lijnbaan towards the famous Koopgoot. A tram line cuts the Lijnbaan in two sections clearly confronting with two choices. One, to follow the new direction of the Koopgoot and two, to cross this cluttered junction and follow the Lijnbaan. I know the Koopgoot will lead me out of my research district, thus I choose to cross the junction and follow the modernist.

I expected the same environmental quality of the first two parts of the Lijnbaan, yet in this part a square⁹ has been introduced and for the first time since I entered the Lijnbaan the high-rise is clearly visible and influences the experience of the Lijnbaan. From here, I am able to enter even further into the core of the block by a covered shopping area. I choose to continue on the Lijnbaan which brings me to the square called Binnenwegplein; the end of the modernist experience of shopping.

The Binnenwegplein gives a strong image of Rotterdams’ solution on of the quality of the nightlife atmosphere. This is ever more obvious by the erection of 105 dwellings on top of modernist Ter Meulen building¹⁰. Again the choice has been made to keep the modernist building representing the reconstruction period of Rotterdam. The idea of introducing more dwellings inside the city centre to intensify the use of the public realm and the social control is a good strategy. Yet unlike dwellings in Amsterdam, where they are also above the retail plinth, the choice has been made to locate the entrance to the dwellings not on the Binnenwegplein directly into the daily life of the shopping district but on the back side of the building inside the core of the urban block. Understandable from an logistic point of view, but the direct connection between dwellings and the shopping area is lost and thus the maximum benefit of the social control by its inhabitants on daily life is partly lost. Secondly it needs to be mentioned that the dwellings are realized above the sixth level, meaning that visual connection and vocal interaction possibility has been lost between dwelling and street life.

Moving from the Binnenwegplein towards the Oude Binnenweg, I realise that this is the first square I cross where a large number of people actually stay and enjoy the public realm. Relaxing on the benches watching other pedestrians passing by while enjoying the sun and a freshly baked snack from the pavilion on the square. Psychologically this little square might even be a bigger public stage than the Schouwburgplein itself as it holds a continuous stream of users during daytime.

10) The municipalities plan to address the discontinuity in daily life of the Lijnbaan block.
11) curved pavilion

⁶) Idem p. 261
14) curtain block façade of the Oude Binnenweg

15) View from side walk on to the curtain façade
Pre-war urban fabric
Entering the Oude Binnenweg I am introduced to a new image of Rotterdam, or better said the pre-war image. The typical Dutch perimeter block presents itself, every house has its own distinctive expression and just like the Amsterdam shopping street the dwellings are above the retail but still have their entrance at the street. The atmosphere of the public realm has also rapidly changed in comparison to the Binnenwegplein and the Lijnbaan, i.e. a more at ease or naturally mixed environment.

This change of the atmosphere can be explained by S. Komossa writing on the vitality of the public domain. She explains that the overlay of diverse functions stimulates the interaction between diverse populations and thus enriching the public life. The pre-war blocks hold cafés, restaurants, shops and dwellings on ground level. Some of the blocks have been scarred by the bombing of Rotterdam. These parts have been refilled by new buildings and thus enlarge the diversity in architectural functionality, expression and scale. This diversity stimulates the unexpected encounter between diverse groups during the day.

From the Oude Binnenweg I turn right, the Mauritsweg opens up to me; a proper Boulevard. Each block facing the boulevard shows neo-classical and eclectic architecture creating the block curtain already seen at the Oudebinnenweg. The Mauritsweg has a broad spatial setup, and in the centre an extra public domain has been created by the use of broad pedestrian path ways filled with art and benches to enjoy the view over the channel on to the grass filled tramline and the old architecture of Rotterdam.

Realizing I’m already moving back in the direction of the train station and that the east side of the Cool district has mainly been neglected in my journey, I cross the district from West to South. Schouwburgplein, Lijnbaanhoven, and a third block passes until I end up at the east edge of the district; the Coolsingel.

Mauritsweg vis a vis Coolsingel
There is a clear distinction between the Mauritsweg and the Coolsingel, yet they are both edges of the Cool district. This phenomenon can be explained using Richard Sennetts writing on Boundaries and Borders; in natural ecologies, borders are the zones in a habitat where organisms become more interactive, due to the meeting of different species or physical conditions. The boundary is a limit, a territory beyond which a particular species does not stray. Clearly the Mauritsweg is a border, approachable from both districts at each side. Urban facilities create an atmosphere for exchange and interaction between the districts. On the other hand, the Coolsingel is a clear boundary with its broad set up of double car lanes and tram lane, it is not a space for interaction. This is partly why the Koopgoot has been created; an underground shopping tunnel allowing pedestrians to cross the Coolsingel safely and carelessly.

Walking back north along the Coolsingel, I realize I’m introduced back to the metropol image of Rotterdam. The built scale has increased drastically. Big cantilevers announce the entrances to corporative buildings, while the plinth along the Coolsingel is a continuous shopping area. The large pedestrian side walk holds all kinds of urban furniture from benches to art and pavilions. Unlike at the Lijnbaan where the high-rise has been set back and hardly noticeable, the Coolsingel shows a continuous ensemble of high-rise offices. This experience continues while I move along the Wena back to the start of my journey through the district; the train station.

Mentionable is the attempt of the municipality to revitalize or the intention to create coziness at the Coolsingel. All the green, the remarkable scattered ensemble of pavilions and the reduction of six to four car lanes are evidence of this notion. They have been implemented to reintroduce the human scale on the Coolsingel. A feeble attempt in comparison to the weight of the post-modern and monolithic monumental blocks dominating the Coolsingel’s periphery.

Reflecting on the experience of reading Rotterdam, Rotterdam might seem as a shattered city with diverse images to varied users, but it is this shattered image that could be seen as the hidden strength of Rotterdam. The

08) Sennett R. Boundaries and Borders, p. 1
bombing of Rotterdam made it possible to reinvent public life and leave traditional dogmas of planning, zoning and architecture behind. The changes in block morphology, typology, the functional organization and management of social hierarchy can be seen as a large collage. This collage is possible to strengthen the public realm at a great scale. Truthfully this is easier written than done; the social quality of Rotterdams’ daily life still has to be improved. On the urban scale, the disconnection between the urban blocks, as with the disconnection of the ‘in-between’ space, should be addressed to effectively intensify the use of public and private space.

It is clear that all the block typologies have their qualities and their flaws. The perimeter block, which has ideal conditions for the knowledge-based economy, is good but the scale does not fit the “zeitgeist”. The modernist blocks show possibilities in the management of the transition from public to collective to private. And the post-modern blocks address the densification in urban blocks. These diverse block typologies show the changing needs from society during history. We now experience a large movement from suburban to urban; this movement has been linked by different theorists to the shift from a production-based economy to a knowledge-based economy.

On the urban block scale, it is now the challenge to reconnect the daily life between diverse groups; meaning less separation and more intertwining to intensify the use of space. The main intention is to stimulate activities; incentivise the spontaneous emerging of interaction (i.e. the creation and exchange of knowledge). This asks not only for a mixture of functions and diversity in the built and unbuilt scale, but importantly, the possibility of temporality in architecture (reacting on the demands of an endless changing society).