As a research group of three students (Martijn van Gameren, Marie-Lahya Simon), we were confronted with the city of Rotterdam and the more specific project area: the St. Jacobsplaats. What we found intriguing was the tension between two factors: the formality and the informality of Rotterdam. Rotterdam a city, destroyed by the war and therefor eased itself from the heavy weight of tradition and historical structures, a city deeply shaped by the infrastructure, a city higly efficient in terms of transportation networks, a city that increasingly suppresses the realm of the pedestrians and bikers. Where the formality of the city is rather ‘easy’ to capture(the framework of the city, the strict grid ect) the analyses of the informality was much harder. The research here was very based on a phenomenological background dealing with events and informal activities. Here I personally was intrigued by the contemporary urban condition of the city of Rotterdam. Referring to the large vacancy rate of office buildings, transformation, the changing role of the municipality (taking a backseat) and the lack of will and/or financial capacity by investors to intervene. These are all very formal circumstances but host very informal activities. Cause we might think these circumstances are becoming an imminent standstill of urban renewal. Yet this is precisely the condition in which new, more temporarily based developments are getting real. Within this habitat the creative class seems to be the ‘new fanged’ pioneer of change, providing the city with a new economy, liveliness and knowledge, or better, securing those for the future. In addition writings as Richard Florida and Jane Jacobs have already stressed the economic value yet there has been hardly any theoreticalers description of this new class and their enivorments by architects. This became the starting point to research the creative class within Rotterdam with the already stressed side questions of informality and formality. Good examples of this new ‘informal’ approach of city renewal are the ‘Schieblock’, the Luchtrecht’ and Podium Mozāïk.

Reflection back on this research for me the concept of a creative cluster is more a ‘side-effect’. Not a necessity but more an opportunity for left over spaces - or vacant buildings and often used as a temporary solution. For me to design a creative cluster (housed in a new building) was therefor rather paradoxal to the subject and the strength of creative clusters in general; using existing structures. Although the general topics of this research, namely the need for flexibility within the design and the bottom approach stayed within the concept.

By analysing the general pattern of Rotterdam we noticed, as a research group, two extremely different grid surrounding the St. Jacobsplaats: the “new” City Centre (from Westersingel to Coolsingel) which provide a regular “Canvas”, anda the “old” City Centre (the Blaak and the Hofbogen) which is organized into a “Spine”. The Spine and the Canvas are working parallel, but are only connected on the south (starting with the popular Meent street), so its only fed in one direction, from the Central Station to the South (figure 1.02, 1.03, 1.04, 1.05). Despite its advantageous urban position of the St. Jacobsplaats it appeared to be a barrier to the general flow of the neighborhood. The main reason for this was for us the infrastructural tunnel shaping the inner area, giving all sort of residual spaces and the huge lack of adress – monotonous program based on a single type housing block. Although the visual perspective to the Blaak appeared to be quite strong. For us it was therefor rather evident to read the quality of the St-Jacobsplaats in its capacity to connect other parts of the city. It became quite clear that we saw the St-Jacobsplaats as ‘a floating area’ right in between the Blaak [market] and the Hofbogen. In this the St-Jacobsplaats offers a critical position in between the Blaak and the Hofbogen. Both the Blaak and the Hofbogen have a very clear identity so the research question became; how to position the Sint-Jacobsplaats between these structures? The goal was to establish a new green pedestrian promenade through the city, as a spine, connecting different parts of the city (north and south). In order to accomplish this goal we had to understand the emblematic structure of the Spine and the existing structure. We did this by making a 3-layered manual. This research consisted different components: the network, the transitions, the areas. The network is created by the south-north ‘Boulevard’ with the multiple east-west orientated streets feeding the spine. So for the network and transitions we focused on the intersection points of these streets, while also considering the different scale which ofcourse affected their morphology. The study of the Areas gave us a idea of function and identity of
The general outcome gave us a good overview of the whole boulevard within the embedment of the city. The general outcome was a lack of program and clear identity. So in order to make the sequence of the space we designed follies, as a answer to make the sequence of the boulevard and reintroduced the water as a element of the boulevard. Within this framework we then focused on the St. Jacobsplaats itself. Where the introvert character of the site was approached as a rather bad feature. So we added program and regaining a clear facade towards the new proposed boulevard. The partition of the site in the masterplan was divided into three building blocks (figure 1.07) My site is in the middle of this partition, which deals with the obvious infrastructural barrier of the tunnel, the height difficulty and the existing building. These volumes act on different scales, while the bottom programmatic approach is more on a low scale dealing with housing and a small public function in relation to water, to top volume delt with high rise in relation with the business area of the Weena street. Where the middle volume is right in between of these different scales dealing with a neighborhood function. Within the proposal the new volume overlaps the existing one. The position of this new volume became critical in the futher development of the building. Where the new volume took almost all the quality of the existing building away. Therefor i eventually took the decision to deviate from a conventional building block as indicated in the masterplan. Instead I enforced to top point of the site, independently of the existing building. Where the transition of the boulevard to the couryard is much more subtle by making a single height volume which host rather informal activities like events and temporal expositions and urban events like a farmer market. The conceptual strategy is made by the connecting different horizontals(figure 1.08). By doing it reflects on the different scales of the site - the urban boulevard and the more privatized inner courtyard, where the top makes the connection to the whole boulevard an therefor the city. At the same time it scales the whole volume down to the level of the networks.
1.07 Proposal for the St. Jacobsplaats, adding three new volumes
existing building (and more to the urban block) but maintaining the capacity to act as an anchorpoint of the St. Jacobsplaats itself and the proposed ‘new’ boulevard. This relation of scale is enhanced by its programmatic implementation. From a very public program positioned along the boulevard to a more private program moving upwards. Where the interrelations in between are made by a restaurant and a juicebar, the so called connectors. The floorplans is divided into a concrete innercore, a second layer of program and the corridor along the facade. The main bearing construction lies between the program and the corridor. These constructural layer consist out of steel trusses which makes the overhang of the tunnel possible, so no extra
construction is needed to overlap the infrastructural tunnel which was a major technical problem concerning the plot. In sense of flexibility and sustainability i chose a IFD-building method. Apart from the concrete inner-core the whole structure is based on components. So the structure is flexible and can rather ‘easily’ be adapted in time. To reflect on this, the shape of the building itself is not very flexible in a way that it has some difficult angles within the floorplan which gives a rather fixed layout. Perhaps it was more efficient to have more square shape in order to be more flexible or chose no such a dominant inner core. I think that was also a general spatial issue where the innercore, the corridor and the position of the secondary structure are to dominant in relation to a certain freedom you need to position different program and the capacity to change different program in a later stage. So i am happy with the details , construction and the emphasis between the facade and the chosen climate system but the spatial content of the building could be stronger.

To end i want to reflect on my working process, where I am not very pleased with the consistency within the chosen design solutions, to many times I switched within the chosen framework. Of course there are several stages within the design evolution before arriving at the P4 and eventually P5. Within the evolution I should have reflected back much more often, not to redefine the strategy but to stick to it. I think the main reason for this was a gap within the design process of almost a half year because of personal circumstances after the p2. For me it has proven to be difficult to step back in the design process after such a ‘long’ period of time.