

Het ging niet om de dragers, het ging om de mensen

Reflection Paper - Martin de Beun - P4 - Architectural Engineering Graduation Studio

The question which my project seeks to answer is unchanged since the research phase: how can a typical postwar neighborhood be made compatible with a circular ecology? My original approach during the research phase was based on the presumption that during the design phase I would focus my efforts in developing a renovation method and strategy that would be applicable on the gallery flat typology in its entirety.

However, after P2, I took the time to re-evaluate my approach by continuing to read and research about successful case-studies. I learned more about cooperations, about the 2000-watt-lifestyle and about '*waardevolle wijken*': stories about circular successes from seemingly vulnerable neighborhoods. In doing so, I learned that true progress towards a circular ecology is not fundamentally rooted in some sort of material or technological strategy but rather in playing with a wholly different set of rules: those of cooperation.

The knowledge I gained through that process made me confident in deciding to abandon the premise of creating a method which is applicable to gallery flats specifically and instead to focus on one soon-to-be vacant elderly people's home in the middle of Boerhaavewijk. This decision better suited the narrative around the creation of a circular ecological initiative in Boerhaavewijk that I aim to create. First, while existing gallery flats have plenty of issues of their own, they are by no means fundamentally wrong. Many of those who inhabit it are happy with their housing, and the housing itself is already highly compact and thus in line with my self-formulated goals for sustainable housing. Should those people, often vulnerable yet with a relatively small carbon footprint, really be the subject of some self-proclaimed sustainable initiative? I find that very hard to argue, and it is thus difficult to justify an extensive renovation.

To the contrary, Hof van Jacob is a building which will be vacant by 2027 because it can no longer meet the requirements of the residents. It is thus much easier to argue that extensive modification can be made to it. Adding to that, the adaptive re-use of an enormous, vacant, somewhat ugly but still usable building is definitely in line with my narrative in which I emphasize a broader approach to the value of existing buildings. After all, the transition to a circular ecology must include most of our existing built environment as well, and cannot be realized with new buildings only.

Finally, the decision to choose Hof van Jacob as my transformation subject also stems from the fact that it is large and diverse enough to house a great diversity of programmes and people. The goal of my project revolves around demonstrating how cooperative ownership and sustainable values can benefit the neighborhood as a whole. That meant that it would not only focus inwards to show how a 2000-watt community would live, but also how that community relates to the development of the neighborhood as a whole. After all, in my research I investigated the fundamental obstacles that the neighborhood faces in transitioning to a circular ecology, which I still aim to address in my design. The fact is that the breadth and ambition of this goal is simply too much to feasibly design within the limits of what was originally, admittedly, no more than a top-up.

Although the topic of architectural engineering may suggest an emphasis on high-tech and cutting-edge solutions, this project in its entirety seeks the opposite: solutions that (re-)use, as much as possible, existing materials, old technology and simple solutions. This embodies the overall position towards architecture that I have developed during my master track: true progress in how we live together, how we should tackle climate change, how we can create better, circular neighborhoods with happier and healthier people should not come from a technological breakthrough or some complex architectural engineering marvel.

It should and will, however, be enabled by taking a different approach and playing by different rules. To not see the postwar neighborhood as decrepit and obsolete but to see the value of its buildings, of their materials and embodied energy. And most of all: the value of the people that inhabit it. They are what can enable that different playing field: new forms of ownership such as the cooperative which circumvent the rigid binary system of rental non-ownership and private possession. To enable new occupants and inhabitants of a neighborhood to take the lead in transitioning to something better. After all, in visiting Boerhaave we learned that there is absolutely no lack of motivated and willing people there.

At this point, I fully understand the design decisions and principles which underlie my project. I feel ready and confident to continue into the final part of the graduation. I believe this phase will be filled first by final refinement of plans and sections, since some of what will be shown during P4 is still based on some older ideas which require review and tutoring and is my first priority afterwards. The decision after P3 was to, up until P4, focus solely on the housing cooperative / 2000-watt-community, to ensure that the project would have sufficient depth and quality down to the details. Having now, hopefully, sufficiently done that, I would like to spend some time again in defining and designing the *neighborhood* cooperative. By doing so, I believe I can create a coherent and integrated storyline about how the synergy *between* the neighborhood and the building is what is eventually the key in creating a circular ecology in the postwar neighborhood.

I believe that that is how I can prove that the approach that I have taken (to play by different, cooperative, rules), which inherently has a different, broader and more holistic view on values, is one that can be applied to many different neighborhoods. This project is no longer typologically limited by the gallery flat, but is instead transferable to other cases because it takes an approach with a different ruleset, with greater societal value.

In conclusion, I believe the choice to refocus my project through the lens of the cooperative was the right one. It allows for a closer alignment between goal and method (circular ecology empowered by cooperative ownership). I feel confident that my choice to switch from a generic approach (the gallery flat) to a specific approach (Hof van Jacob building) was well-argued and supported by my tutors. Emphasis on the cooperative approach has allowed for a more explicit focus on the qualities which are made possible in that model, as opposed to traditional ownership methods wherein they are often not. These are all, as is the key argument in my project, things that allow for both more sustainable living without sacrificing, and often even increasing, quality of life. Moreover, this approach demonstrates that such a lifestyle can be made possible even within an old and soon-to-be abandoned building by embodying a different view on material values.