

P4 Reflection paper

Ruben Bremer

Student name	Ruben Bremer
Student number	4482972
Studio	Heritage & Architecture – Revitalizing Maritime Heritage
Tutors	Nol Hermkens, Thijs Bennebroek, Marie-Therese van Thoor
Date:	09-05-2024

Introduction

In this paper, I will reflect on my research and design process during this graduation year. The reflection tackles the relationship between my research and my design development, and how my final design eventually developed from my research. Furthermore, I will reflect on my research methodology and its societal and academic context.

Short research summary

My graduation topic involves the narratives and cultural themes of former workers connected to the abandoned Kloos & Zonen waterfront in Alblasserdam. The abandonment of the site and the Kloos & Zonen company, results in the disappearance of its former workers community, and with them the narratives and cultural heritage that built the current local culture. Considering that a lot of the narratives of those workers have remained undocumented/untold, this thesis focused on uncovering those, in the hope of discovering what caused local culture to be the way it is now.

The goal of this research was to create an insight into the untold narratives of the historical workers' community of the Kloos & Zonen industrial waterfronts, in an effort to discover the local culture that is interwoven with the Kloos site and reintroduce said culture in a future intervention. The thesis therefor investigated the following research questions:

What are the narratives of the historic workers community of the Kloos industrial waterfront?

And from which cultural themes do these narratives originate?

In an effort to uncover these narratives and the themes that facilitate them, I created oral histories (Perks & Thompson, 2005) by interviewing former Kloos workers (or people otherwise connected to the site). The narratives found through the oral histories were then compared with the narratives found through existing literature and sources. The comparison of these results allowed for the conclusion of several cultural themes connected to the Kloos site in Alblasserdam, giving an indication of what the Kloos company used to mean to its surroundings.

From the oral histories, a local culture attached to the Kloos waterfront can be concluded. This seemed influenced by the post-WW2 reconstruction period and the local conservative Christian environment. Zooming in on what Kloos & Zonen company used to mean, the workers mentioned that they felt taken care of by the company, and that working at Kloos created a sense of community and invoked a sense of pride.

Relation to mastertrack

In order to connect my design to the Heritage of the area, I settled on my design goals; 'Create a future, livable neighborhood on the Kloos site, that still celebrates what Kloos used to mean to its surroundings.' However, it took me a while to state this goal, as I struggled with finding the connection with heritage during the early stages of my design. I remember having the goal of creating a new, livable neighborhood on the Kloos site, in an effort to tackle the current needs of the area. I also wanted to do a 'better' job than the current proposal for the site, provided by FSD. Within this goal, the heritage aspect faded to the background, as I only focused on the functions necessary to achieve that.

Having realised this during the P1 period, it took me a while to separate myself from my original goals and take a look at the heritage values as well. After some deliberation, I tried linking my research to my original design goal, whereby the research results could hopefully provide a guideline for achieving the goal of creating a livable neighborhood on the Kloos site. In this way, I could hopefully show through the redesign what Kloos used to mean to its surroundings, in a contemporary manner. In this way I think I achieved that link, as through my redesign (which at face value loses all touch with the original function of the site) the spirit of Kloos lives on, as it provides the same themes.

On an architectural level, I looked more to the value assessment of the site, and which tangible elements of the industrial history remained. I chose to celebrate and reuse the steel structures, which I valued highly. I accomplished this by using the crane tracks as structural supports for galleries.

Methodology

As seen in the summary, I created oral histories of former Kloos workers by interviewing them, an effort to discover their narratives connected to the site. By comparing the different narratives, I tried to conclude the cultural themes attached to the Kloos site, which facilitated these narratives.

Looking back, I think this method of interviewing workers worked quite well, as it delivered on the goals I set to achieve, namely to figure out what Kloos used to mean to its surroundings. Instead of looking only at the books (which tended to only mention the achievements of Kloos but not the lives of their workers), The oral histories really uncovered a more subjective and human value attached to the heritage of the site. The method of interviewing and creating oral histories was quite easy and repeatable, as this method could be applied to any site, as long as people related to the site are still present and willing to tell their story in regards to the heritage site.

Maybe interviewing only four people of a similar age group was a bit too limited in the scope of things, but it was all I managed to achieve during the time I had. I think the results would not change, were I to interview a lot more people of different age groups. The stories I gathered all speak of similar experiences, supporting the themes I found. Maybe finding more people who worked for Mercon (and experienced its closure) would give a more negative view in regards to the site, but it seemed that they were unwilling to be interviewed (as mentioned by Ad, one of the interviewees).

Looking back on what I intended to do and what I ended up doing, I clearly wanted to do too much. Within my research products, I created a soft atlas, based on Jan Rothuizen (2014). Though it is a good visualization of the narratives connected to the site, it didn't help to conclude the cultural themes. It did help in creating the heritage route in my design, however. I also created a landscape biography, which I scrapped after feedback from my tutor. It didn't aid at all with concluding what Kloos used to mean. This was me trying to do too much at once.

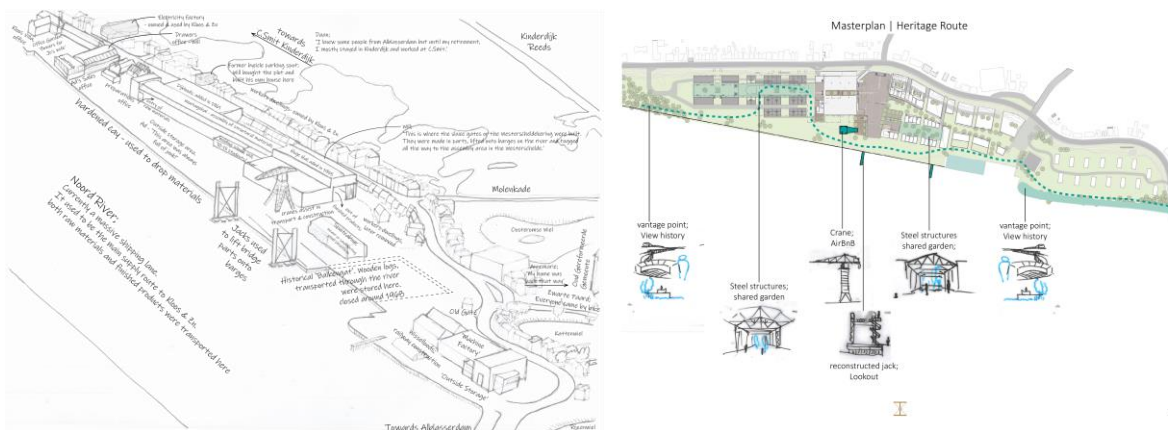


Figure 1: translating soft map into heritage route in Masterplan design.

Transferability of results

the initial goal I set for my graduation topic can be applied to other heritage locations that harbor historical societal values - 'celebrate what (...) used to mean'. This transferability perhaps strengthens the method. I do think that the themes discovered while achieving this goal, are quite unique to the Kloos site, and represent the Alblasserwaard as an area quite well. Talking about religion, being a closeknit community, and taking care of one another, are values found throughout the area.

On the other hand, the interviews of workers of a specific site are of course – site specific. Some cultural themes they talked about might also be applicable at other industrial sites, or former workers of similar age – yet most themes remain quite location and company – specific. I found this to be very elaborate when talking with A-M, as she left the Alblasserwaard when she was 16. Compared to the other interviewees, she has experienced living in Alblasserdam as well as in Utrecht in her life, and was therefore capable of a very nuanced, comparative view in regards to the themes and values present within the Alblasserwaard.

Context and value

Considering what my research achieved, both for my design and the interviewees, I'd say that my research added both heritage and academic value. I tried to bring back what Kloos used to mean. If my design were implemented, part of the Kloos atmosphere would live on within the redesign.

Secondly, the interviewees felt very valued – they were happy to tell their story. To me that's actually also very important. They felt heard. There are a lot of positive but also negative associations with the site and it's good to highlight those too, and not just the stories of achievements and directors.

Thirdly, creating oral histories (where possible) of people related to the heritage site, added a new and valuable element to the overall assessment of the site. The human factor, the cultural heritage connected to the site and its surroundings, remain relevant. This may be wishful thinking, but I am convinced that conducting these interviews should become a part of the Heritage studio. Of course, it's not applicable in all situations, but if a heritage site with a lot of societal impact is considered, the method could truly add value.

Research and design

As I intended throughout my goals, my research directly led to the concept and vision in regards to urban interventions, celebrating 'what Kloos used to mean', while creating a livable neighborhood that tackles the surroundings' issues. The site proved pretty barren in my opinion, with the remaining tangible elements unable to depict much of the site's story. This prompted me to search elsewhere. This led me to discover the cultural heritage attached to the site, which prompted me to create oral histories from interviewing former workers.

These steps led to my concept, 'Kloos, Inspired.' For my vision, I tried to reinterpret the historical themes discovered through the research. The themes translated well to interventions in regards to the programme and atmosphere I wanted to achieve, as shown in the figure below:

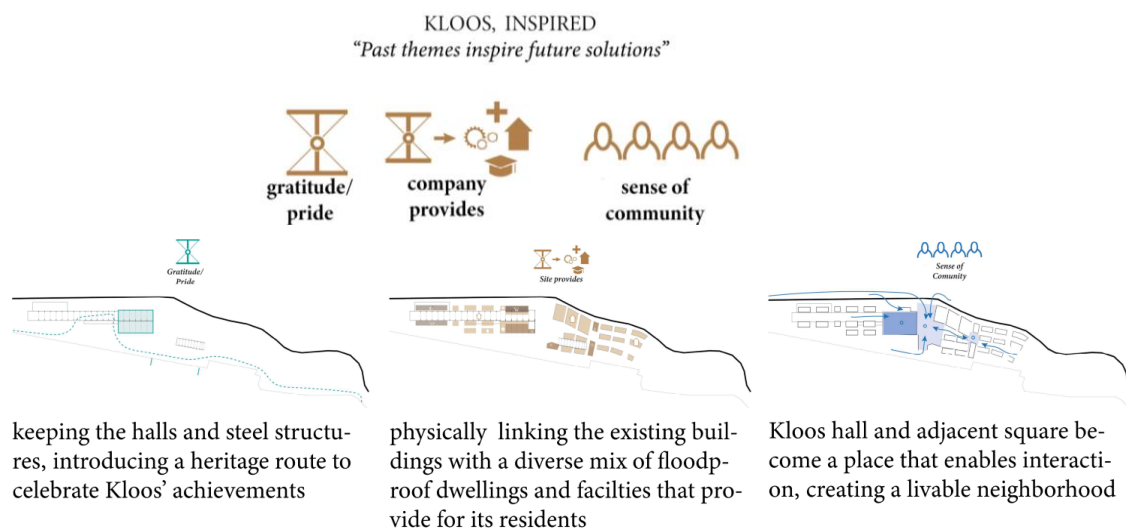


figure 2; Urban concept and vision, 'Kloos Inspired'

The 'Provide' theme prompted me to bring several of these former functions back into my redesign, tackling the theme through urban planning. Other, less tangible themes like pride and a sense of community were also attached to the site. These themes I tried to integrate through architecture.

For example, the old Hoge hal serves as a central point where local residents could interact and mingle. This was done by adding multiple new functions under the roof of the abandoned hall, including shops, a daycare and a community center. I added a square in front of the Hoge Hal as a gathering place too. Dwellings were also designed in a way that would increase interaction between neighbors, hopefully will create a sense of community within those dwelling blocks as well. Reinterpreting the sense of pride, I found tougher; In the end I chose to bring back the large steel objects once used and produced, retaining the Hoge Hal, and telling the story of the Kloos site through a heritage route. This, with the intention to celebrate Kloos and its achievements.

Tackling spirituality

Although I think that I succeeded in bringing back what Kloos used to mean through my design, I struggled with the atmosphere, and the emotion of nostalgia. The former workers of Kloos I interviewed were truly nostalgic for the glory days of the company, but I didn't see a way to tackle that element. When looking at the people I interviewed, I don't think my urban design alone could do their emotions justice. They described the Kloos company almost in a spiritual, nostalgic way and I found that really hard to honor.

This was laid bare during my P2 presentation, which I took to heart. Comments were made in regards to tackling the sense of spirituality, nostalgia attached to the site. And I didn't have an answer for that. My tutors suggested adding a church, or a place of contemplation, but at the time it seemed so foreign to me. 'There is a church right next to the Kloos site. Why would I need to put another church there?' I remember thinking.

I realised quite late in the design process (after P3) that spirituality doesn't necessarily have to connect to religion, not even in a conservative Christian town such as Alblasserdam. Maybe wandering through the factory and being in touch with the heritage is sufficient. I eventually tried to implement the ability to experience that atmosphere to the fullest.

My best attempt to connect the spirit of the factory and the user within my design, is probably the 'contemplation room' within the Hoge Hal. Its in a quiet corner of the Community Center, and it creates vistas both towards the Noord river, as well as to the steel structures of the factory. Hopefully, in that quiet place, someone can have their own spiritual experience together with the factory.

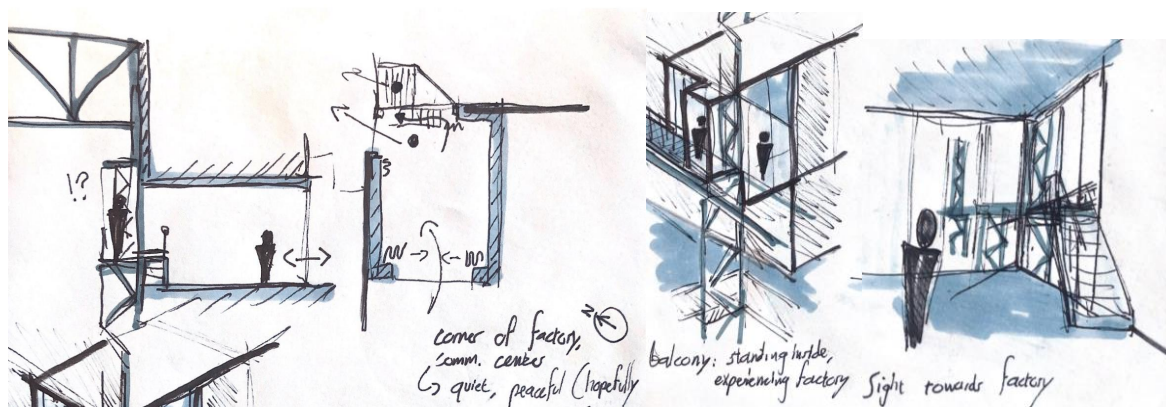


Figure 3; initial sketches of the 'contemplation room' within the initial design

Tackling the graduation process

Looking back, I noticed some patterns in my own thinking and designing process. Firstly, I struggled to see the bigger picture of my graduation process. Though I enjoyed working on heritage, architecture and the sites needs, I had enormous difficulty connecting both together, and my work (and so too my presentations) reflected on this. I found the more tangible issues to be more pressing, which really conflicted with my thinking on depicting heritage. This lack of seeing the bigger picture, ties in with my struggle of defining my goals for the design. In the rush of producing a design, they became overlooked. This may be why I neglected to tackle the issue of spirituality any earlier, or why other design decisions lacked direction. I knew what I wanted to achieve, but not how to achieve it. Luckily, in the end (and with the help of some guidance from tutors and peers) I got there.

In short, I'm very pleased with the research I conducted, but I admit to having doubts about my implementation of the research within my design. I think my design reinterprets a lot of things that the company used to mean (and the architecture fits with the industrial atmosphere), so new residents would live with the spirit of the place. That's good, as the industrial heritage of the site would live on. However, touching that emotion of nostalgia or spirituality shared by former workers, might be a bridge too far for me.