Where architecture meets society,

How to enhance the sense of community in post-war neighborhoods, focusing on shared and semi-public spaces

"I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who…"

Rudyard Kipling, <u>The Elephant's Child</u>

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Introduction

CONSTRUCTION
PER YEAR

SUPPLY

DEMAND

AFFORDABLE HOUSING
FOR YOUNG BUYERS

Figure n.01

The housing situation in the Netherlands is the main topic of discussion of our graduation studio.
According to the research that was conducted in 2021 by `ABF research`, the situation today is considered a crisis since the ratio between the demand to the supply has reached new limits for the past decades, and now stands at 5%. Thus, the Dutch government has decided to try and build one million new homes by 2030 to reach again a ratio below 2% of housing shortage to housing stock (ABF Research, 2021), with densification strategies that consume less of the remaining green open spaces.
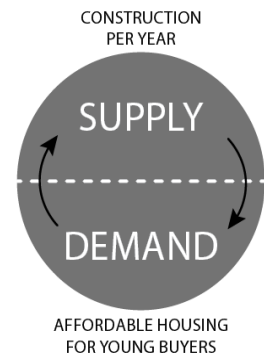
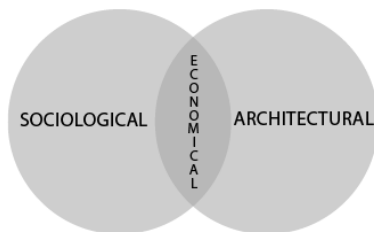SOCIOLOGICAL   ECONOMICAL   ARCHITECTURAL

Figure n.02

In my perspective, the general problem is composed of three main aspects: the architectural and sociological aspects, while the economical aspect is the overlapping area between the two. [figure n.02]. It manifests itself in the quality of the building and its maintenance, and the characteristics of the population.

Groot IJsselmonde is an example of a neighborhood that was built to low standards due to the circumstances. The period it was constructed in, after the second world war, brought an urgent need for cheap housing projects. Nonetheless, the economic aspect emerges in the built environment and in the social composition of the area, by the high number of social housing corporation spread around the neighborhood. It has an impact on the level of commitment between the residents and the quality of the public spaces.

As Whyte (1980) wrote, social life in public spaces contributes fundamentally to the quality of life of individuals and society as a whole. Physical places facilitate civic engagement and community interaction. Promoting social interactions with strangers is associated with greater feeling of belonging and subjective well-being, as well as feeling appreciated by and connected to people around you.

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of our graduation studio`s topic is that we get to work with an existing neighborhood. It`s about the connection between past decisions and today`s residents, and our role as planners.

The solution I look for will be efficient, modular, and scalable that will appear in the communal spaces in post-war residential buildings, enhancing the sense of community. Transforming un performing public spaces and heling people create a world of community powered by public spaces.

Case study

The neighborhood that I am investigating is Groot IJsselmonde, which is located in the southern part of Rotterdam.

IJsselmonde is a post-war neighborhood. Today, the post-war neighborhoods portray low quality architecture, neglected open public spaces and sometimes, viewed or perceived as unsafe. Various typologies of neighborhoods were constructed over the years, such as the cauliflower neighborhood typology, for instance, which is still under constant critique for the low density it presents, and lack of urban renewal potential. Nonetheless, the masterplan of IJsselmonde consists of the ideas of the garden city concept, which was exceedingly popular in post-war reconstructions in the Netherlands. The large green open areas that spread between the buildings represent the flexibility that the densification strategy could benefit from.

The built environment is characterized by repetitive row houses and gallery buildings, vast green spaces, many car roads, parking lots and some water streams. Looking at the map, the housing typology immediately identified in slim and long lines, in patterns, cluster by cluster, while between them separating big open areas, which are mostly left unused.

Walking in the neighborhood between the variety of buildings and houses, the entrances seemed to me all the same. Clean and empty, from dirt but also from any personal identity. Behind the blocks of apartment building, there is a hidden courtyard, green and empty, where you can find kids playing right under the parents observing eye from the window above.

There is a variety of people that compose the population of IJsselmonde, from the demographic research that I`ve conducted, the biggest age group is people between 25 and 45 years old, and following is the age group of 45 to 65 years old, together are the majority of the population with 51.1%. To me, it represents an active group that is potentially to participate in activities. Most of the residents are unmarried, with a level of education between low and medium. Which present a potential need for communal activities that will bring people from different backgrounds and capabilities together. Moreover, more than 50 percent of the houses are part of social housing corporations, which is accessible to people earning below 44,000 euros per year. (Information About Neighborhood Groot IJsselmonde, 2023)

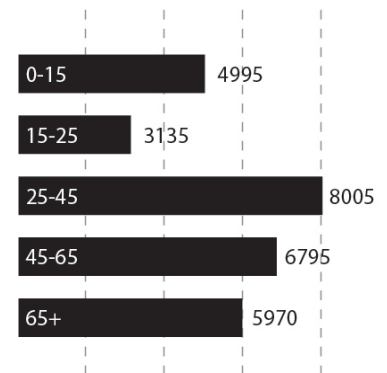| Age group	Value
0-15	4995
15-25	3135
25-45	8005
45-65	6795
65+	5970

Figure n.03
source: AllCharts.info

It is unique and may influence my decisions after research concerning community needs.

In my design, I would like to enhance the sense of community through the public and semi-public areas. Therefore, I would like to understand their sense of pride and belonging to the neighborhood and their desire and commitment in turning things around.

Research questions

In my research, I would like to focus on the relationship between the quality of communal spaces, the semi-public spaces, and the sense of community of the residents. My hypothesis is that there is a connection between the architectural design and the sense of community in the area. The main reason, is that in these areas between the public zone and the private one, there is a high chance for social interaction opportunities, and according to Van Lange, P. A. M., & Columbus, S. (2021), Social contact is associated with positive psychological and health outcomes.
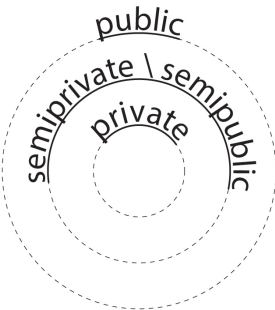
I am interested in investigating the role of semi-public spaces, as the transition spaces between the outside and the inside, the public and the private. And I believe that architecture can provide a platform for enhanced social interactions.

Figure n.04

I aim to investigate how semi-public spaces can be changed by a community, and vice versa- how can the sense of community be affected by changing the space. That leads me to my main research question- **How to enhance the sense of community in post-war semi-public spaces?**

And specifically, **what design strategy can be used to enhance community life in shared semi-public areas?**

To understand the effectiveness of the used spaces, I will identify the spaces that stayed as they were originally designed, and the those that were changed, especially when such change was performed by the inhabitants. Mostly to understand better the priorities of the residents, and what they aspire to have, and did not exist.

According to the research conducted by `project public spaces`, sociability is a difficult quality for a place to achieve, but once attained it becomes an unmistakable feature. When people see friends, meet and greet their neighbors, and feel comfortable interacting with strangers, they tend to feel a stronger sense of place or attachment to their community - and to the place that fosters these types of social activities.

The sub questions divide into two main aspects, one is the community aspect of the research and the other one is the architecture. The subjects intertwine and together support the main goal in understanding how to formulate a design strategy for enhancing the sense of community in IJsselmonde.

Following the Rudyard Kipling`s poem, - my questions are What, Why, When, How, Where, Who.

SOCIETY / COMMUNITY LIFE ASPECTS	ARCHITECTURE / BUILT ENVIRONMENT ASPECTS
• **Who are the subjects?** • **How many people associate with the local community?** • **Why do they live specifically there?**	• **What type of built environment exist there now?** • **Where are the semi-public areas located?** • **When what the last time that there was an architectural intervention?**

And since I am still in the initial phase of the process, the following questions are still to be improved and edited for the final questionnaire:

SOCIETY / COMMUNITY LIFE ASPECTS -

- What do they aspire to change?
- What do they want to preserve?
- What is their prioritization?
- What is the level of involvement in community life?
- What type of common activities do they share?
- What do they like about living in the neighborhood?
- How can they define a better community life?
- When did they arrive in this neighborhood?
- How Do the community members communicate?
- Qualitative analysis of the content.
- Where do they meet with other community members?

ARCHITECTURE / BUILT ENVIRONMENT ASPECTS -

- What is the use of communal spaces?
- When did changes start to appear in the built communal spaces, or when did it stop?
- How to adapt nonfunctional communal spaces to the needs of the community?
- Where are the communal spaces present more often, indoors, or outdoors?
- Who planned them originally and is responsible for replanning those spaces?
- What (communal) spaces do they aspire to have?

Guiding questions for observation (source: project public paces)-

- Can you see the space from a distance? Is its interior visible from the outside?
- Can people easily walk to the place? For example, do they have to dart between moving cars to get to the place?
- Does the space function for people with special needs?
- Does the place make a good first impression?
- Are people using the space or is it empty?
- Is it used by people of different ages?
- Are people in groups?
- How many different types of activities are occurring - people walking, eating, playing baseball, chess, relaxing, reading?
- Which parts of the space are used, and which are not?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework will explain the topics that will integrate as part of my research process and solution to come. There are studies that have already been done on that subject, which I analyze and use for my research as well. The theoretical framework is also divided into two main aspects, the architectural and the social, each one of them has sub-categories as follows.

Social

Sense of community

One of the definitions of a community is- "the feeling of sharing things and belonging to a group in the place where you live" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). And there are distinct types of communities as well, local community, international community, rural community, closed community. What I want to understand is how to identify a space that has influence on the community. And moreover, how to create such space, or modify an existing space to enhance the sense of community.

"A sense is an understanding about something; an ability to judge something" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). And together, *a sense of community*, arrived from a psychological approach that focuses on the experience rather than the structure (qualitative and not quantitative). It reflects the individual`s perception and understanding of the community and its relation to its other members and participants. (Wright, S. (n.d.).)

I would like to identify the feelings of the residents of IJsselmonde, towards the local community and to their built environment. Identifying something that is so personal and subjective will be an interesting way of designing a solution.

Following McMillan and Chavis, it is theorized that sense of community is represented by four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. (Chavis, D. M., Hogge, J. H., McMillan, D. W., & Wandersman, A., 1986) If the residents of IJsselmonde feel that there is a community, and their opinion on the communal spaces that exist today (planned) and their functionality, as well as their wishes and needs for those spaces.

How to identify how people feel? How to examine feelings (more, less, non-existing)? What are the spaces that portray communal feelings?

Social housing

The high presence of social housing in the neighborhood is an important aspect of the research. I would like to know the connection between the population that lives in this type of housing, the formation of a community, and how it manifests in the built environment.

In their book, Swenarton, M., Avermaete, T., & van, D. H. D. (Eds.). (2014), are analyzing the ambition of number of countries in Europe, including the Netherlands, of developing welfare projects in the decades following the second world war. In my perspective, it gives an important overview of the period in which IJsselmonde was planned, and why.

Architectural

Post-war housing

Various types of housing projects have been built after World War II. There were projects that were planned before the war and built after, and there are projects that responded to an urgent demand, after a crisis for example, which follows the theme of affordable housing for large numbers of people. The housing typologies varied between single family units to multi-level apartment buildings, while the latter one, is the housing typology that I`m interested in analyzing further. One of the housing projects I analyzed, is the case of Bijlmermeer, which is a post-war neighborhood that consists of repetition of the same housing typology, but was under multiple reconstruction projects, which led to a different built environment than what it was originally planned.

This analysis will respond to the question- *What type of communal spaces exist in a building? (Entrance, lobby, staircase, threshold?), and what role do they have in the day-to-day life of the community? What can a communal space do for the people and for the building?*

Public spaces

Collectiveness in a community is manifested in the built environment through the community`s activities that are observed in public areas. I found various organizations that tackle this issue in existing communities and formed solutions that have already been examined and implemented around the world. One of them is `project for public places`. Their approach is to help communities transform their public spaces into vital places that highlight local assets, spur rejuvenation, and serve common needs. Their main goal is to elevate public areas with the people, in order to create community-powered spaces. After evaluating thousands of public spaces around the world, they developed a guideline that is called `what makes a successful place? ` in which they detail the four main qualities that a great space should have – it is accessible, people share activities there, the space is comfortable, and it is sociable, people would want to invite their families and friends there. The four qualities are intertwined and support the main goal that if a communal space works well it serves as a stage for community to grow.

Repetition in masterplans

The fact that the neighborhood consists of repetitive buildings, made me wonder if it can be efficient to design a scalable solution that will influence not only one apartment building and its residents, but potentially the rest of the neighborhood as well. I will try to understand *What is the best building complex in IJsselmonde that could be the prototype of the solution? Can one solution really suit most of the population? Can one solution be an answer to the key issues? Importance vs majority. What is more important, and for what would most people agree?*

Density (Master planning and neighborhoods)

Study of urban plans that include a whole neighborhood built from scratch, and specifically master plans that focus on collectivism. One subject I found is the *Kasbah* project, by *Piet Bloom*. It shares similarities with the neighborhood I will be working on, list the stamped repetition of houses, but in terms of density, it holds about four times more residents than usual residential area (Kaal, 2018).

Does integration of new people affect the existing population? Even if they share social status.

Methodology

1. Data collection / mapping

The general analysis of the area was conducted as a group work with colleagues from the design studio. We divided into three categories of research and informed each other of the findings. This type of research method was efficient in gathering a lot of information in an abbreviated period of time and it formed a uniform base for all of us, as a starting point for individual research. Moreover, using this method has been helpful in getting the initial data, while the interpretation of it provided the research questions.

2. Plan analysis / past – present

Comparison and analysis of case studies neighborhood projects in the Netherlands, which were planned and built, before and after IJsselmonde. As for the case study, it would be interesting to identify if the present state of the neighborhood is different from how it began 50 or 60 years ago. I am interested in following the footsteps of organic changes that are happening in the area, especially to the built environment, by the residents. The actions that they took, and what they modified, comes from their intentions and capability for making a change.

3. Interviews and observations

Part of the qualitative aspect of the research, and for the purpose of reaching an integrative solution, I took inspiration from ethnographic anthropologic research methods, and I would like to conduct interviews with residents from IJsselmonde, as part of the design process. I will seek their expectations, feelings of belonging to the community, to bridge the gap between the present situation and their aspired one.

Observation is considered a bottom-up method in understanding how people act in their day-to-day life, with the objective of investigating the human dynamics in different urban settings. With a set of questions that I prepare in advance, I wish to identify which spaces are in use and which are not, and what type of interactions happen in the public sphere.

4. Mapping flows

The term 'Flow map' originally comes from cartography. It is a particular combination of maps and flow diagrams, where the width of the arrows is proportional to the flow rate — the so-called Sankey diagrams. (Dent, Borden D.; Torguson, Jeffrey S.; Hodler, Thomas W., 2009). This type of investigation will show how do people interact with the communal spaces in the chosen part of the neighborhood. The results will support the hypothesis that some areas are less in use than the rest, which later become the target spaces of my design.

5. Gap analysis

This method is helpful in setting a plan for reaching a certain goal. After deciding that my main ambition is to deal with the existing, and that want to increase the sense of community in an existing space, I will have to decide also what I would want to keep, what to change? And what is the process for applying the changes.

Research diagram

Sub- questions

What
Why
When
How
Where
Who

Architectural

Social

Theory

Post war housing
Public spaces
Repetitions
Density

Sense of community
Social housing

WHAT

WHY

RESEARCH QUESTION

What design strategy can be used to enhance
the sense of community in post-war semi-public
spaces?

Methodology

Data collection
Plan analysis
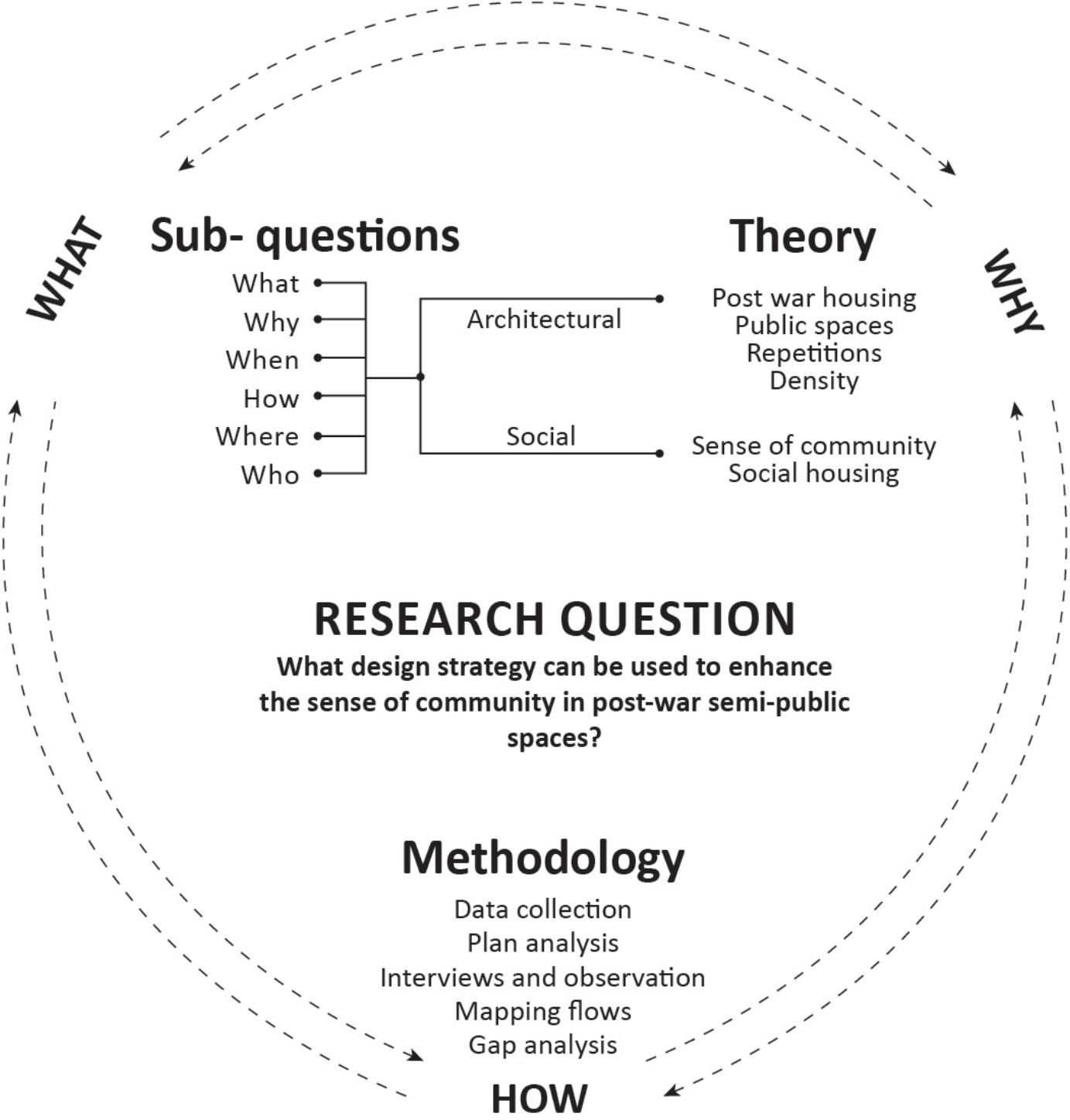Interviews and observation
Mapping flows
Gap analysis

HOW

Figure n.05

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The full poem *I Keep Six Honest Serving Men,* by Rudyard Kipling:

I keep six honest serving-men
  (They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
  And How and Where and Who.
I send them over land and sea,
  I send them east and west;
But after they have worked for me,
  I give them all a rest.

I let them rest from nine till five,
   For I am busy then,
As well as breakfast, lunch, and tea,
  For they are hungry men.
But different folk have different views;
  I know a person small—
She keeps ten million serving-men,
  Who get no rest at all!

She sends'em abroad on her own affairs,
  From the second she opens her eyes—
One million Hows, two million Wheres,
  And seven million Whys!