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Binckhorst

A Palimpsest of Architectural Lives

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BLOCK 3: THE NEW FACES THE OLD

BINCKHORST: A PALIMPSEST OF ARCHITECTURAL LIVES

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ABSTRACT

Engaging the example of the course “Binckhorst: A Palimpsest of Architectural Lives”—a master level design studio—this paper addresses issues of cohabitation and coexistence between past and current actors, activities and programs in Binckhorst, The Hague. It discusses explorative methodologies of analysis and design, that aim to create innovative and anchored urban interventions for the transformation of post-industrial landscapes. Binckhorst is an exemplary case-study to this regard. Home to a 14th century Castle, a 1920s cemetery, 1950s-60s heavy industry buildings and empty offices, postmodern housing projects and contemporary refugee settlements, it currently witnesses an accelerated change. Small-scale creative industries, event venues and apartment buildings transform and redefine its architectural identity. Moreover, Binckhorst’s strategic location next to the city’s center and a major train station, has attracted the interest of local and international architects, planners and developers.

The course “Binckhorst: A Palimpsest of Architectural Lives” engages the students with this rich context and guides them to develop design methods where the old and the new can be actively part of the area’s new blooming. Through innovative site analysis assignments, personal interactions with the area’s actual actors, careful and in-depth study of the Binckhorst’s heritage, a precise selection of The Hague housing typologies, and the employment of bottom-up design methodologies, the studio advocates for a pedagogical approach in which the

knowledge acquired from the analysis informs every step in the design process. The studio follows a structured sequence of three phases: “Description,” “Transcription,” “Prescription” (Havik, 2014) ensuring the constant interweaving between analysis and design. It culminates in a big-scale housing project that needs to incorporate the area’s past and present layers and suggest architectural propositions that envision a future for the co-existence between the old and the new.

A thorough presentation of the studio’s theoretical context, the methodological framework, the topics and parameters of investigation along with selected student’s examples, will unpack in detail the pedagogical topics addressed by this studio and suggest possible courses of action for architectural education.

KEYWORDS

Post-industrial landscape; typology; lived space; urban analysis; urban literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Scope of this paper is to discuss and analyze a pedagogical methodology for design in post-industrial urban areas. As an educational approach it partakes from the philosophical and architectural discourse that values place, the lived experience of this place, and the place’s local characteristics both at the scale of the site and the city. It advocates that, although the globalization and digitalization of everyday life has led to

less place-bound architectural practices or human interactions, “getting back into place”¹ is a crucial position for a meaningful and long-term revitalization of urban landscapes. As a pedagogy it guides students to investigate the richness embedded in a given topos (place) and include in their work its actors, users, prevalent culture and underlying history in order to ensure that old and new spatial conditions can interact creatively and prosperously. This pedagogical methodology is implemented and examined in the case study of a studio course—taught during the fall semester of 2019—that challenged students to imagine the revitalization of Binckhorst. Binckhorst is a post-industrial and rapidly transforming area in the city of The Hague, Netherlands, where historical, cultural and social elements have impressed a strong mark on space. The studio consisted of twenty (20) international master level students, and was taught simultaneously by two architectural instructors and one building-technology instructor. We, as instructors, met the students for in-person education a whole day (eight hours) once a week, during the course of twenty (20) weeks. In these weekly meetings selective guests ran short workshops (on topics like narrative techniques, circular economy, comfort and discomfort in architecture) and offered constructive feedback as the students were developing their work. In between the weekly meetings the students were instructed to follow specific lectures in relation to the topics under examination, offered by the Faculty’s Lecture Series, while also conduct site and bibliographical research. Through the specific case-study we wish to discuss explorative approaches of analysis and design, that aim to create site-specific and experience-anchored urban interventions for housing programs. Instead of advocating for the replacement of the industrial business—

as often happens under the pressure of the housing market—we asked the students to develop projects that ensure the co-existence of new and existing programs in the place. Aligned with the conference’s thematic, “The new faces the old,” the studio led to design proposals where “the different physical and cultural layers that have built our cities can live together in harmony.” In short, “Binckhorst: A palimpsest of architectural lives,” invested in a close and multilayered reading of place, proceeded with imaginative and unconventional interpretations of this reading, and culminated in a housing design project that negotiated the creative interweaving between existing and new spatial relationships.

1. THE CASE STUDY

1.1. The intellectual context

In developing the studio, we took the freedom to explore and combine two main positions in relation to place: a typological (formal, artifact centered) and a phenomenological (linguistic, human centered) one. Both positions question the notion of place and place-making in developing meaningful, site specific projects, although starting from what appear to be two opposite ends. Following the Italian historian Giulio Argan, we believe that an exploratory and analytical study on typologies—designed and built according to a determined architectural position—could be an important step in the development of new types in relation to the characteristics of a given place. The emphasis is not on copying the past, but rather on finding ways to carefully maneuver between the richness of architectural historical knowledge and contemporary spatial questions (Argan 2007, 157). Based on a similar approach, architectural

¹ *Getting Back Into Place* is the title of the philosophical work by professor Edward E. Casey, a dominant voice in the discourse for the importance of place in architectural design. Published in 1999, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* marked a significant moment in the renewed (as the title clearly states) interest in place for architecture. With three chapters dedicated exclusively to architectural topics, the work discusses the significant role that local environments and place-specific design techniques can play in architectural practice. Given that for the vast majority of the 20th Century architects disregarded place, culture or even history, the book was a significant call for action at the turn of the 21st Century.

theoretician Antonio Monestiroli argues that a design project should combine communal and continuous general characteristics, with the specificities related to given site conditions (Monestiroli 2005, 32). Including in the analysis the notion of typology, offers the opportunity to organically anchor a new project in an existing city, which is another way to address the project's sustainability and longevity. Engaging further the discourse on place, our studio followed a phenomenological and experiential connection to place; an emphasis on how space is actually lived by its users and experienced by its inhabitants. Henry Lefebvre and his notion of "lived space," as unpacked in his seminal work *The Production of Space*, urges us to focus on the dimensions of space that can be heard, touched, seen and even smelled: to study spaces as they are lived. In other words, to question what role spaces play in the lives of their users and inhabitants, how space features in their thoughts, minds and memories (Lefebvre 1974, 84). Juhani Pallasmaa has expanded this philosophical thinking into architecture, through his homonymous essay "Lived Space: Embodied Experience and Sensory Thought." Pallasmaa discusses the importance of sensorial perception of place, the role of the body in space, and of course the fact that "lived space is structured on the basis of meanings and values reflected on it by the individual or groups" that inhabit it (Pallasmaa 2005, 129). Theoretician Alberto Pérez-Gómez, following this phenomenological tradition, furthermore warns us that architecture nowadays cannot be blindfolded by technological or engineering demands, without a careful connection of these demands to lived place. In his most recent work *Attunement: Architectural Meaning After the Crisis of Modern Science* he specifically argues that:

Ecologically responsible buildings and sustainable cities do not in themselves connect us to a meaningful life; (...) The issue is cultural sustainability, our ever-sought ambition to

peacefully co-exist with others on a shared living planet (Pérez-Gómez 2016, 232-233).

This observation is of particular value to our educational approach, as our architectural studio had a pedagogical particularity. It was taught simultaneously by both architectural and building technology professors, bringing into the conversation questions of construction, structure, environmental issues and environmental impact from the very beginning. The interest in sustainability and circularity, a big conversation in architecture nowadays, was an important element of the studio, but it was discussed within the theoretical context unpacked above and in which the studio was based.

1.2. The physical context

Binckhorst is a rough and non-curated palimpsest of distinctively different architectural buildings and identities. Its historic 14th Century Castle—the very first building of the area—functions currently as a plastic surgery clinic. A 19th Century gas factory, which heavily polluted the soil during its operation, is now transformed into a workshops-lab. Modern structures of glass and metal have been added to accommodate the growing needs of a 1920s cemetery. The 1950s-60s heavy industry buildings and offices are re-appropriated by small scale creative industries, often run by people with a special commitment to the area and its community. Postmodern office buildings converted in housing projects are adjusted (many times by the owners themselves) to accommodate a 21st Century lifestyle. The former landmark aircraft-production school is transformed into a social-events venue, without changes to its exterior façade. Printing industries and former government services have left the site and the buildings they used to occupy remain empty. Automobile businesses, with a long presence in the place, continue functioning, along with many building-construction firms. A garbage

collection center covering the needs of the city of the Hague—and emitting a strongly unpleasant smell around it—along with several recycling firms are fully functioning on a daily basis. Refugee settlements are added in between all the above programs, while at the same time many big vacant plots attract the interest of local and international architects, planners and developers. The area's strategic location close to the city's center and the country's national agenda for the addition of 1.000.000 homes until 2040, are the main reasons behind the strong renewed interest in the Binckhorst. This rich, almost surreal, conglomeration of architectural and cultural identities, is surrounded by water canals, as water in the area (and the country in general) is still used both for industrial and recreational purposes.

1.3. The educational context

Framed within the theoretical context already presented above, the aim of our studio was to develop new housing-typologies with interconnected social programs, so as to transform the post-industrial Binckhorst into a sustainable, high-density, mixed working-living environment. To this end, the studio asked the students to address four main questions:

1. What kind of housing typologies and which public programs are needed for the future of Binckhorst?
2. How could existing industrial buildings get incorporated into new design interventions?
3. How can the new Binckhorst transform into a sustainable (circular) and inclusive society, becoming also an integral part of the city of The Hague?
4. What would the new identity of the area be?

The intention of our studio was to work towards a culturally and environmentally sustainable future urban Binckhorst, through

an educational frame that urged students to take a clear position in a pressing contemporary problem, encountered in many urban environments around the world.

2. METHODOLOGY

Given the focus on the local character of place, the interest in a phenomenological approach to architectural design and the urban nature of the area of study, we valued relevant to experiment with the pedagogical methodology proposed by architect and educator Klaske Havik in her book *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (2014). Havik's work synthesizes creatively many of the theoretical positions that have formed the core of our pedagogical philosophy. Her ideas emerge from the notion of Lefebvre's "lived space," touch on phenomenology and prioritize place and local particularities, like typology, atmosphere and narratives. The book suggests a methodology based on three consecutive modes of action: "Description," "Transcription," and "Prescription". These were the modes we followed in structuring our studio.

2.1. Description

Emerging from the definition of the very verb *describe* (...), Havik reinforces the conviction that "to be able to describe, be it in text or in drawing (...), one has to be able to observe, and to perceive an object in all its complexity" (Havik 2014, 38). To understand spaces and places, "and to understand how we 'live' them, one should start by closely observing them, by identifying their spatial characteristics, as well as their atmosphere and the activities and trajectories of their inhabitants" (Havik 2014, 38). Our Binckhorst studio emerged indeed from a systematic and meticulous study of place.² Through dedicated weekly assignments the students explored the history of the area's

² The area was specifically chosen because it could be easily accessible by the students any time during the semester.

development, the history of its architecture, the place's physical elements and materiality, the immaterial characteristics and the prevalent atmospheres. The assignments were designed to cultivate the students' observational as well as creative skills. Observations and analysis about Binckhorst had to be synthesized in imaginative and creative ways to be communicated in class. Engaging the place's history for example and examining old habits and customs that influenced space and its appropriation, the students experimented with drawings that like palimpsests incorporated aspects from different time periods. Elements and activities from the past appeared in different and complementary directions on the same surface, literally layering on the same drawing many different temporalities (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. The different temporalities of Binckhorst. Source: (Aga Kús 2019)

Mapping activities captured physical and immaterial elements of Binckhorst, as they appear interwoven in the real experience of lived space. The students proceeded with hard and soft mapping pairings in order to communicate the atmospheres that some of the physical spatial elements impress on the area. How do specific programs create vibrant environments around them for example? How do social networks (that is a non-architectural element) appear and transform space? Examples on urban and architectural mapping and readings on the topic deepened students' comprehension on

the nature of these assignments. Precedent studies both through drawings and *in-situ* visits led to a deep knowledge of apartment typologies with a long history in the city of The Hague. Conversations with the current inhabitants and recordings of their activities and social interactions further enabled a close reading of the Binckhorst. Building-technology exercises on circularity and sustainability pointed out the current difficulties of the area and the possibilities for improvement and change. Each week the findings of the different explorations on "Description" were discussed extensively in class and shared among all the course participants. At the end of the "Description" stage the group compiled a collective Binckhorst Atlas, to be used as a formative guide throughout the following stages.

2.2. Transcription

Following the mode of "Description," *Urban Literacy* focuses on the use and social parameters of a place. It introduces the mode of "Transcription". This methodological stage "departs from the observation that architecture is influenced by social practices, and that even so, architecture, by giving space to people's environment, has its influence on social behavior" (Havik 2014, 93). Based on the commonly used meaning of transcription as 'to write a version of something,' or 'to write in different medium; transliterate,' (Havik 2014, 94) *Urban Literacy* discusses the necessity of literary strategies for architectural design. How can narratives for example help us feel what it means to be in the place. The importance of narratives for architecture has in recent decades been argued for by many architectural educators.³ Professor Anca Matyiku in her article "Architecture Drawn Out of Bruno Schulz's Poetic Prose" for example, starts from the observation that architectural design is an act of fiction (exploring fictive possibilities that eventually condense into built environments)

³ For more see: Sioli, A., Jung, Y., 2018. "Introduction," in Reading Architecture: Literary Imagination and Spatial Experience. New York; London: Routledge

and proves with her work how fiction, narrative, literary and poetic constructs can be valuable tools in the creative process that leads to architecture (Matyiku 2018, 114-115).

With these theoretical underpinnings guiding the stage of “Transcription,” we proceeded with a three-week assignment titled “The Many Narratives of Binckhorst.” We experimented with literary techniques to imagine people’s interactions and inhabitants’ activities in the area. We asked the students to write narratives that explore how it feels to inhabit one of the buildings in the area. We asked them to “inhabit” their precedent studies and produce architectural drawings that emphasize the elements they captured with their narratives. We encouraged them to work with graphic novels and story boards that investigated daily rituals and habits in space.

Concluding this stage, we asked the students to imagine and work with fictional characters. In groups of four, the students had to conceive of three characters at the figurative scales of 1:20, 1:200 and 1:2000. The first character (scale 1:20) had to be someone with limited social interactions in the area, an inhabitant knowing approximately twenty (20) neighbors. The second character (scale 1:200) had to interact with approximately two hundred (200) people in Binckhorst (being the owner of a small bar or a small industry for example), while the third character had to be someone who interacts with approximately two thousand (2000) people in the area (like a city counselor that works on the current transformation of Binckhorst or an artist with an active Instagram account for workshops and performances in Binckhorst for example). Departing from these characters and their individual stories—which the students imagined, wrote, revised and shared with their peers—the assignment culminated with the creation of a device that propagated random and unforeseen interactions among these characters—as is usually the case in real life. The example of “Binckhorst’s Wundercamera” was one of these devices. The group of students, inspired by the

idea of a wundercamera, a box of wonders, created a box with slides. The slides included information based on four categories: stories and habits of the characters, slides with historical moments of the area, slides capturing characteristic landmarks of Binckhorst, and slides with atmospheric aspects. Random and spontaneous arrangements of the various slides could lead to new interconnections and activities in place. The “Binckhorst Wundercamera” was an open-ended device, as the students’ intention was to add new slides in the future (following the rapid transformation of Binckhorst) or remove existing slides if they were not capturing the identity of the place any more (Fig. 2). With the stage of “Transcription” completed, the studio moved to the third and last mode, that of “Prescription”.



Figure 2. Binckhorst’s Wundercamera. Source: (Rachel Mein, Chloë Oosterwoud, Sofia Pavlova, William Shaw 2019)

2.3. Prescription

“Prescription” was meant to lead to a design with a critical position for the future of Binckhorst. As Havik points out, “prescription can be translated as ‘to write before’, thus to outline the contours of a not yet existing spatial reality—this is, to imagine a future reality” (Havik 2004, 149). Though, an important point needs to be clarified here. “Prescription,” as she says should “by no means be understood as a recipe of which the effect is already known—on the contrary, precisely the unknown character of a future

world is at stake here" (...) grounded on the delicate balance between reality and imagination, and the possibility of taking a critical position (Havik 2014, 149-150). Indeed, the studio asked for a critical position towards a project incorporating housing and social programs in the area. No more requirements were added, apart from the constant reminder to learn from and build on the knowledge acquired during the analysis stages. Students were required to combine living with programs and activities they thought appropriate for the place, necessary for its future, and related with its current condition and its inhabitants. They had to design apartments for life-styles connected to the revitalization of the area, while also inspired by the existing architectural housing typologies. The students had to select the location of their project in Binckhorst as no plot was specified by us, they had to decide on the number of apartments and houses they thought appropriate to add with their project, they had to advocate for the necessity of additional programs in the area, and they had to demonstrate how and why their proposal is appropriate for the existing character of the place and can lead to a sustainable future. The final proposals varied from apartment buildings with urban farms, educational programs, libraries, community centers and commercial activities.

3. OUTCOMES

3.1. Sitopia: A slow food commune

Student Sofia Pavlova studied in detail the distribution of food in Binckhorst during the mode of "Description." She discovered that many social and impromptu interactions happen during lunch time, in ways that influence the development of the area. Many urban furniture appears in Binckhorst to facilitate eating together (from benches to urban picnic tables) and many small and

bigger restaurants start occupying former industrial buildings. The area's existing buildings also prioritize eating, and many new firms incorporate big open kitchens in their offices. During the "Description" mode, she also studied the communal living in the famous *hofjes* (courtyards surrounded by small private residences usually for older women) of the Hague. Moving to the "Transcription" mode she studied the movements of "Slow Eating" and the many emerging urban farms, around cities of the world. She created imaginative narratives anchored around the social aspect of eating. As she proceeded with the "Transcription" she advocated for the necessity to "gather more around the table, as a community, as neighbors, as citizens." She worked towards the creation of a *sitopia*, a word inspired by the Greek words *σίτος* (*sitos*), which means crop, and *τόπος* (*topos*), which means place. Her project touched on the many communal activities witnessed in the area, and the emergence of a group of young professionals who prioritize a healthy life style, value access to fresh ingredients and are committed to understand how food is produced and consumed. Her final design project, which emerged from the re-appropriation of an old industrial building, consisted of an apartment complex by the water front, combined with a program for fish farming, vegetable cultivation and poultry growing (Fig. 3). Her building was designed to provide fresh food for the immediate dwellers but also bring together the broader community of the Binckhorst and the Hague through seminars on food education and hands-on workshops on cooking. The emphasis on the social aspect of food, guided also the design of the apartments. The dwelling units were designed so that movable divisions could open up—according to the inhabitants will—the individual kitchens to the building's communal areas, allowing for neighbors to literally cook together while they inhabit their apartment. Moreover, two main atria—where the main vertical circulation takes place—were

designed to allow the sharing of food and “coming around the table” opportunities for the community of the building. Thus, the project suggested a new future for the area, based on the lively social network of the neighborhood it was located, the possibility for low energy fulfillment of many of our daily needs, the care for circularity and the interest in a lifestyle much more communal and social.

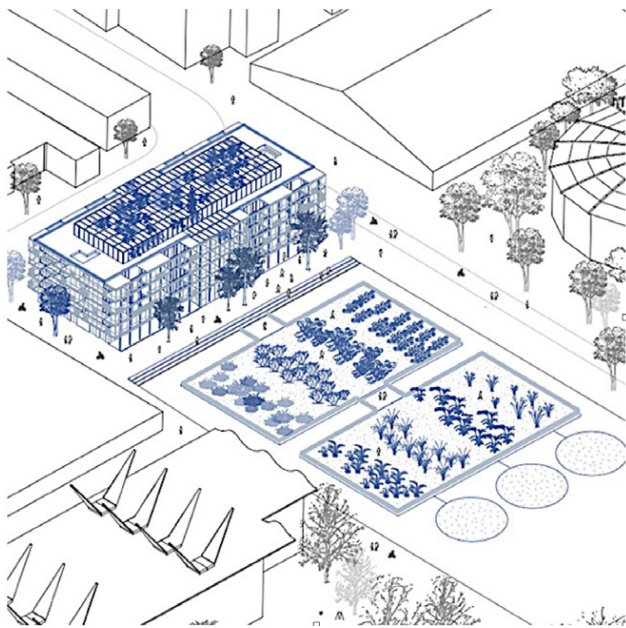


Figure 3. *Sitopia in Binckhorst*. Source: (Sofia Pavlova 2020)

3.2. Making the Living: Hybrid high-rise

Maarten van Blokland developed an unconventional proposal emerging from a critical and radical position on Binckhorst’s current transitional phase. As he observed during the stage of “Description,” the existing small and medium scale entrepreneurs and industries—which produce goods and offer services for the wider area of The Hague—run the risk to disappear from the area. Developers and investment companies seem to aim for high-rise apartment buildings for the future of the Binckhorst, as a way to cover the high demand for housing. While working on the “Transcription” phase, Maarten created

characters based on interviews with many professionals in the area. That led him to suggest a radical co-habitation of living and working environments. His design proposal advocated for the absolute extinction of commute time and space, by creating high-rises that bring apartments and workshops next to each other (Fig. 4). He selected the three most prominent professions to be found in the area—heavy industry, delicate production, creative businesses—and designed for those a symbiotic living and working that eliminates the threshold between the two activities, interconnecting them in a dense and productive fashion that promotes the sharing of facilities. It was not a coincidence that during the typological studies, Maarten had explored in depth one of the first apartment buildings of the Hague with shared facilities rooms (laundry, garbage collection, etc.). Proceeding with his design, Maarten looked thoroughly into the functional needs of each selected profession and the social norms of the professionals involved. He created spatial conditions tailored to them specifically. His high-rise proposal was meant to invigorate the local character of the area and allow services and industries to better serve the whole city, thus becoming a vital part of the Hague.



Figure 4. *Symbiotic working and living (detail)*. Source: (Maarten van Blokland 2020)

3.3. Street of Slow Embrace: The surreal in the everyday

The Street of Slow Embrace was another critical proposal for the development of post-industrial areas. During the stage of “Description” student William Shaw identified historical moments of slow speed in the area (streets designed to slow down cars prioritizing pedestrian movement). He noticed surreal collages of unexpected co-existences: free running chickens next to fast running trains; art installations in the middle of impossible to reach junctures, public playgrounds in between small factories. He also studied a communal living apartment building, where the inhabitants lived much of their daily activities in a public setting. His observations lead to the creation of the “Binckhorst Wundercamera”—during the “transcription” stage—which multiplied further the surreal, unexpected and magical interactions in space. He thus proceeded with the design of a housing complex and public spaces where the speed and haste of everyday urban living was questioned. Possibilities for surreal and magical moments in the everyday living became the driving force of his design: washing the dishes while becoming part of the public space and a spectacle in the city (Fig. 5), sleeping while looking at the stars and hearing the animals that inhabit the apartment’s external walls. The materiality of his apartment building enhanced the slow embrace of the project. The walls, covered in fur-like thatching drawn from local resources, would grow over time as the inhabitants would water them. William advocated that the public space should be infiltrated by elements of private life, a possibility inspired by the Dutch culture itself—in order to get sustainably revitalized. He refused to design additional programs, making the public space his main emphasis in the project and showing how such an approach can connect the Binckhorst with the rest of the city.

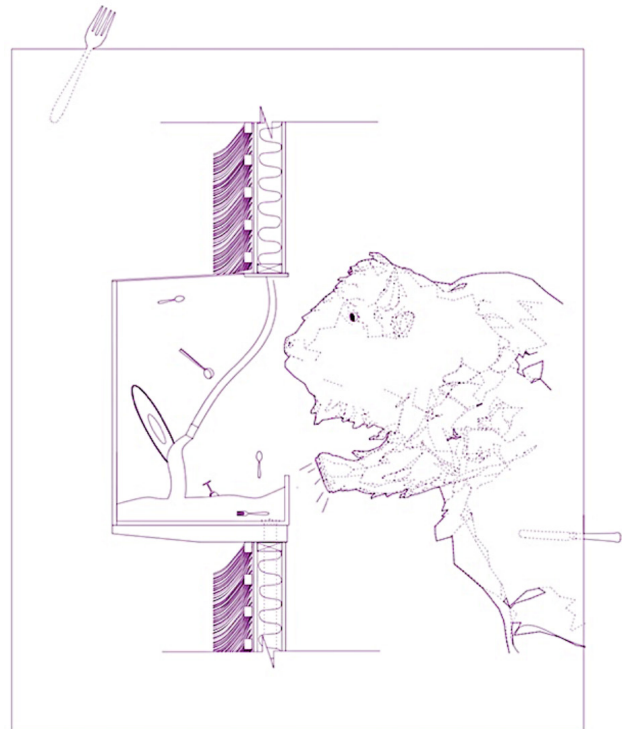


Figure 5. Surreal moments of everyday life. Source: (William Shaw 2020)

CONCLUSION

The studio “Binckhorst: A palimpsest of Architectural Lives” concluded with an exhibition of the students’ proposals in the Binckhorst itself. The city of The Hague has recently re-appropriated an old building, transforming it into an information center for the future development of the neighborhood. It is in this building that the students’ exhibition took place. Inhabitants of the immediate area and the city, municipal officers, and people from close-by cities like Delft came together to see the proposals and discuss with the young architects-to-be their visions for the transformation of the post-industrial area. The site-specific approach of our pedagogy, the interweaving of knowledge from the Hague building typologies with the lived space and its experiential richness, were communicated strongly to the audience, who engaged in asking questions and contributed to the general dialogue for

the area. The audience moreover cared to understand the proposals in depth and tried to imagine, along with the students, what the design interventions could offer to their life. Anchoring the projects in existing and tested typological precedents, molding the findings from these typological investigations to incorporate the changing needs of the area's younger population, and spending time in the area understanding the people's needs and aspirations, was what made the proposals convincing for the exhibition visitors. It is also what made the proposals exemplary paradigms of an educational approach towards design, that values place with its history and lived experience. Theoretician Pérez-Gómez reminds us that historically it was the architect's job to make "inhabitants feel at home in the city, to intensify their sense of purpose and belonging in public, through the institutions that framed daily life" (Perez-Gomez 2016, 3). The students with their work, felt that they could provide precisely such a sense of belonging to the future inhabitants of the fast shifting post-industrial and multi-cultural area of the Binckhorst.

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