

old walls, new ties

Amersfoort - Amicitia (NL)

In the last couple of years, Amersfoort has shown great dedication to reshaping its city, especially by densifying the eastern part of the city center, the Eem banks. Selecting several outstanding architects, the city has undergone an interesting and ongoing facelift.

Assessing the different sites proposed to European 18, we would like to emphasize the brave move of both : selecting sites bridging the center and the Nieuwe Stad, and, most importantly, the engagement towards considering the city's own existing stock, an opportunity to re-evaluate the city in a contemporary way.

The present team has been delighted to work on the Amicitia site, as complex as iconic it is. Having read carefully the in-depth brief of the city, the team will now take you through its attitude and principles for the site, before explaining the project and closing with what they think could be an interesting turn for the city to continue its urban development.

Intro : Attitude

Everything is Heritage

Starting as bold sounds scary; however, it's only a first impression. Such a repelling feeling appeared to most readers of Charlotte Malterre Barthes' book, *A Moratorium on New Construction*. Nevertheless, when most people thought she was forever calling for a stop to construction, she was actually just calling for a pause, where, together, we can look at what is right under our eyes.

Working with the latest developments of the 20th century in Amersfoort was a great challenge—an opportunity to realize how strong shapes have merged together, with one thing remaining after analysis: built matter.

As the argument that the construction industry is outrageously consuming our planetary resources grows indisputably, the present proposition invites to consider keeping everything that is already there. Whether the place's shapes are shocking or beautiful, the whole complex must be read as outstanding—and, therefore, worthy of interest.

Assessing qualities and misfits

Once this is said, a clear assessment of the site's reality had to be made. Of course, our site visit could only reveal the obvious: the sunken street, lacking a proper address, was almost exclusively deserving deep and dark spaces. One of them, the rear ground floor, is not helped by its very closed façade.

Despite the monumentality, to the architect's eye, the very spiky corners on the right, left, and back parts of the building cannot be argued as efficient spaces. On top of that, the almost 350 meters of continuous façade, in a city center, naturally invites to rethink the local urban fabric.

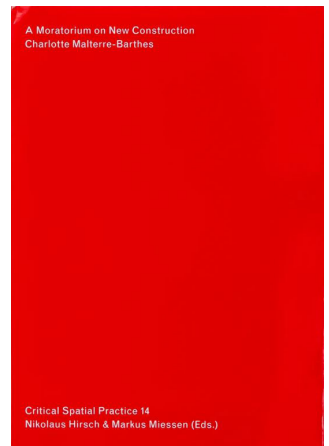
On the other hand, the large free plan of the Amicitia historical building and its rear are very flexible. The depth of the wing is free for adaptation, the building well maintained, and the triplex around the back patio are well protected from the city buzz.

Core Ideas

Restoring Urban Scale : 1 = 4

One could have argued, from a historicist point of view, that the original Amicitia building would need to regain its autonomy. However, by necessity, offsetting its façade by 5 meters, simply brings back a human scale to this overwhelming site.

By separating the core building from its left, right, and back wings, it ends up creating four buildings instead of one. Moreover, this surgery, offers greater porosity and stronger connections through the site—both east/west and north/south. This first move offers diversified paths that give a chance to wander—opposing the way this whole was originally conceived as a single street to be, wrongly, experienced.



▲ Charlotte Malterre-Barthes' book, *A Moratorium on New Construction*, 2025



▲ Open plan of the ground floor of the back building, 2025.

▲▲ Courtyard of the back residential building, 2025.

Old and New as a Complementary Whole

Fragmenting the existing fabric is obviously a subtractive act resulting in the loss of surface. However, as necessary as it is to cut this building apart, it is equally necessary to extend it in order to match the requested programmatic implementation.

To do so, the design team considered extending the existing building to propose a new face to the city, but also to generate variations—key to restoring the compositeness of a city center fabric. As such, the left and right wings receive a front extension, adding the required surface area. To some extent, this recalls the block qualities that could be observed in Karelse & Van der Meer Architects' sketches at the early stage of the project in 1996.

Moreover, these front additions frame and sequence the *Utrechtsestraat* square, the *Amicitia* historical building, and the *Arnhemsestraat* square. Beyond clarifying the fringes of these urban elements, these extension interventions also aim to formalize as wholes where old and new structures function without confrontation. The formation of these amalgams is an ode to the transformation of cities without erasing their current presence.

Dissolution of Backs for New Fronts

As the urban front receives a facelift, the back is approached in a more subtle way. Indeed, the brief mentioned an outdated aesthetic; however, we are seeing in it forms from the 1990s, that could be considered architecturally relevant.

Instead of rethinking the entire aesthetic of the façades, the design team opted to requalify their ground floors. By creating new openings, one can understand what happens in these spaces from the streetscape—or, conversely, gain views from the inside—thus improving the usability of the space. For the design team, this new condition is an essential intervention that already contributes significantly to the reactivation of *Achter de Arnhemse Poortwal*.

Cohesion-Oriented Programation

This rethinking of all façades as new fronts must be supported by an adjusted program. The brief clearly called for turning away from retail and bringing culture back into the estate—an interesting homage to what used to be the *Amicitia Sociëteit*. However, while this philanthropic society was once held by elite patrons, the program of the *Amicitia* of this century incorporates diverse people, focusing on cohesion.

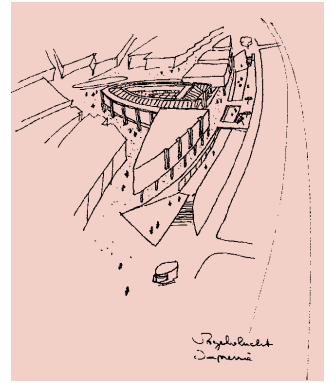
As such, we propose generous public spaces with appropriable leisure structures (kiosk, playground, platforms, etc.). The historical *Amicitia* building is fully dedicated to culture, with a square that can host events related to its programming. The ground floor of the rear residential building becomes a space for workshops, reintroducing small-scale production into the city—more on the value of the productive city can be found by delving into the 2016 Rotterdam Biennale of Architecture, entitled *The Next Economy*. The left wing of the building is transformed into a cooperative typology, designed for both living and working, with potential for workspaces (freelancers, liberal professions, artists, etc.) and/or flats. This building hosts communal functions such as kitchens, common rooms, large terraces, shared laundry, and daycare on the ground floor—a clear need in the neighborhood. The right wing of the building offers more generous flats and a sports facility on its ground floor. The attention to varying housing types aims to accommodate diverse socio-economical profiles and family structures—all this on the convivial *Zocherplantsoen*.

The Green Belt : A Garden Assortment

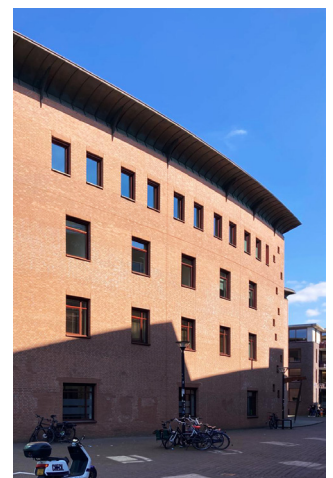
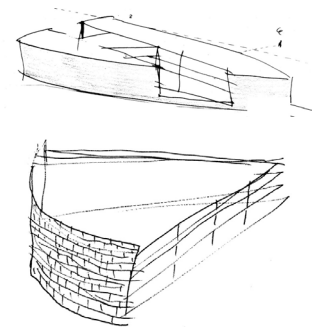
Amicitia is positioned at a crucial spot on the green corridor; it must articulate its wider and denser eastern part, the existing park, and its west area—an zone currently sealed off, where the corridor will never be as wide as elsewhere.

As such, the design team proposes a sequence gardens, composed of an orchard (front of the right building), a terraced landscape (front of the historical building), a lower edible garden (front of the left building). Once again, the approach consists of creating varied situations for inhabitants to appropriate the neighborhood.

Where needed, a simple strategy of unsealing through ground cutouts can be used to sporadically improve the streetscape and increase water infiltration.



▲ Study sketch for *Amicitia* development, Karelse & Van der Meer Architects, 1996.



▲ Eugene Liebaut, sketch for *politiekantoor*, Aalst, 1996.

▲▲ Eugene Liebaut, sketch for *cultureel centrum*, Tienen, 2006.

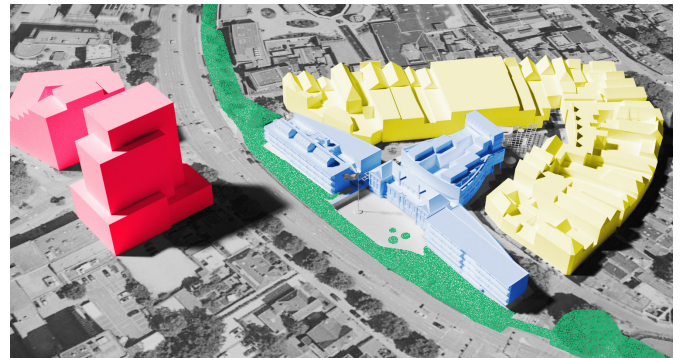
▲▲▲ *Het Bewindcentrum*, building in the vicinity with the sharing remarkable facade language with the back of *Amicitia* presenting the same groundfloor issues.

Should this Site Bear 15,000 sqm ?

As strongly as the city wishes it, the conditions for a qualitative green belt must be put into place. In order to keep the corridor as wide as possible, the team initially envisioned vertically extending the building. However, the structural complexity of this endeavor and especially the narrowness of the back street, led to abandoning this option, resulting instead, in front extensions.

Indeed, the contemporary requirement to work with the existing built stock made it more difficult to match the projected floor area. Nevertheless, a section through the surroundings—from the center to the far side of the car ring—revealed a gradient from low to high density, the latter being embodied by the forthcoming development of the *Sam & Sophie* tower blocks. The design team acknowledges the outscaled presence of this future development in this particular zone of the belt. Based on that, we decided to limit the scale of our interventions to maintain a human scale on this side of the belt, capping the height at 4 to 5 floors—a sort of trade-off.

A quick calculation of the gross floor area ratio (from 1.1 to 1.8 FAR) and dwellings per hectare (from 48 to 110 DW/HA) for our intervention demonstrated the coherence of this density, aligning with medium-density standards—which we believe best suits this area to ensure livability.



▲ *Sam & Sophie* outscaled proportions facing Amicitia estate. Red: High density; Blue: Medium density; Yellow: Low density.

The Project

This is the moment where the design team would like to take you to the three entry panels, to link the above-mentioned attitude and core ideas to the design. As explicit as they tried to be, we would like to reassert and clarify some key elements in the following lines.

Weaving

1

The leading ambition of the project is to start from the existing situation and try to create ties between the current urban components. As such, strengthening, extending, introducing, continuing, and delimiting serve as the main vocabulary to understand how links are made between the past, present, and future of the site.

Public Space Activation

5

The first steps of the project start with subtracting the sunken southern strip and fragmenting the building. By doing so, the site begins to breathe, and one can envision a larger set of movements throughout the estate.

Mostly, it enhances additional front and back public spaces, respectively seen as introverted—where the cultural program projects onto the plaza—and extroverted—where the square radiates toward what the blind façades of *Achter de Arnhemse Poortwal* could become if not only the Amicitia building but also its neighbors foresee transformation to turn around toward this new square.

Soft Interventions

8

This public space ambition is complemented by a wide range of space activators. Among them are: a kiosk, to host neighborhood events or be a revival of the music kiosk; ramps, to navigate height differences for all; a set of stairs, to take a break; a light and a flag, to create a sense of address; a pergola, for soft guidance; platforms, play areas—everything needed to make people stay for a minute or a lifetime.

Blending gestures

3

The cuts in the building and the extensions are made visible but always try to blend with the existing vocabulary. The rounded cut of the back building merges with the



▲ Excerpt of a revived back of the estate as the *Achter de Arnhemse Poortwal* becomes a public space.

existing façades, while the front extensions feature façades you could find elsewhere on the car ring.

Architecturing new inbetween spaces

15

The series of abstracted illustrations show a new set of spatial dispositions, ranging from rooftop greenhouses, rich circulations, roof gardens, generous terraces, exposure of the historical building's back corners, new entrances, and a large diversity of qualitative in-between spaces that you can discover once you zoom in the design.

Towards 12,000 sqm

18

As the last façade of the estate implies, one might not be satisfied with the actual floor area proposed. To address this, one could, in an ultimate phase, consider extending the left wing to six floors and adding a slim tower to the back building.

Outro : To Think Further

To think further, the team decided to hint at some speculations that would strengthen the site and its surroundings in the long term.

The Last Links to the 5 Squares

In order to complete a fluid neighborhood, one might consider connecting the *Varkensmarkt* to the new square at the north of the estate. The team proposes opening up the block to the center as a continuation of *Koestraat* and *Hellestraat*.

A Fourth Facade for an Attractive Multi-Use Heart

The extension of the north building might become necessary when coupled with the opening of the block to the city center. In doing so, the cultural/productive center would regain a strong presence. The building would no longer have a privileged orientation but, like Janus, face both the inner city and its periphery.

From Amicitia to Amicitia Banks

When looking toward the outer city from the south cultural square, the opportunity to link the site to the water would make it a very distinctive place, offering both housing and cultural space with access to the water.

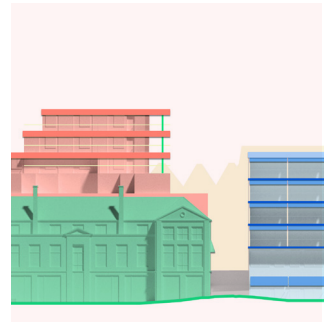
Negotiating Waters : A Potential For Housing

Amicitia could benefit from the introduction of a canal and the reduction of car traffic in front of its estate. Indeed, the narrow space between the current building and the street no longer allows for extension. Only a road reshaping would make this possible. By negotiating waters, Amicitia could become an actor of transition for the city, and eventually, the landowner could benefit from it with the implementation of low-rise suspended units offering a covered bike path in the park.

Towards the Inhabited Green Belt

By initiating this type of housing—promoting living in a park—the project could extend to the west and become a precedent for a new typology of living in the 21st century. Just as Edgar Chambless's *Roadtown* was a radical idea for the 20th century, how could this linear city be rethought as a support for a bike-oriented city, proposing well-connected affordable housing punctuated with urban mixers in the constantly reinvented city of Amersfoort? *Het is altijd tijd voor Amersfoort!*

Thank you for reading.



▲ Speculation view pushing the sites limits for more usable floor area.

▼ Oscar Niemeyer, *Parque ibirapuera*, hinting at possibilities for a free floor with construction on top, São Paulo, 1950s.

▼ Concept sketch for the inhabited *zocherplantsoen* park.

