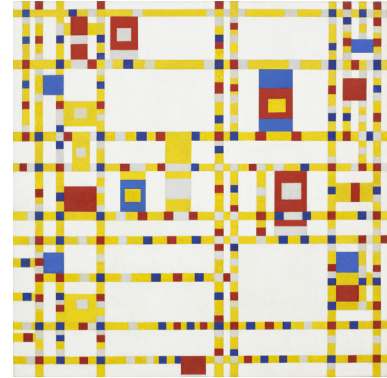


# Onze Lieve Boogie Woogie

A new cultural district for Amersfoort, where art meets the city



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Mondrian – Broadway Boogie-Woogie

“Architecture is a social act and the material theater of human activity.”<sup>1</sup>

— Spiro Kostof

## Introduction

Taking inspiration from Amersfoort’s 15th century landmark *Onze Lieve Vrouwentoren*, and native modernist pioneer Piet Mondrian’s painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943), the OLBW cultural district celebrates the city’s love for the arts as a communal and dynamic achievement. The brand-new theatre and film complexes are incorporated into the existing urban fabric combined with the adaptive reuse of existing buildings, and the addition of a Citizen’s Hub to the brief for cultural and communal activities. OLBW turns to the social condition of the city as a setting of spaces made for the people, by the people. Similar to the construction of a cathedral, not just a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ of different artists, artisans, and specialists, but a communal undertaking where all layers of society came together, committed, and cooperated by sharing common cultural and natural resources. In terms of form, the district is shaped as a picturesque Townscape, where everyone is welcome, creativity can flourish, and each person and activity can find their “stage”. This versatility extends in space as well as time. The second point of departure, Mondrian’s painting, is significant for its vivid variations in rhythm, tone, and mood. It signaled fine art’s turn to a larger and more varied audience, referencing at the same time the community-rooted Boogie Woogie music. In a parallel manner, the new cultural district is rendered accessible to the public and a wide array of uses by establishing a dynamic timeline, capable of accommodating changing usage of facilities in terms of scale, style, type, spontaneous or programmed occurrence. OLBW is thus, a paired creative and social process to form the cultural heart of Amersfoort, with

historic values and contemporary standards. An experiential journey bringing people together where the city takes the theatrical stage and carries its historical identity with excitement towards a new, adaptable future.

## Interpretation of a theme: “Resourcing” by social dynamics

Responding to European 18’s topic of “Resourcing” we turn to social dynamics and grassroots forces as the main drivers for the cultivation, maintenance, and perseverance of a resilient urban ecosystem. Central to this is the idea of a cultural incubator in the form of a Citizen’s Hub in the southern part of the site, acting as a bridge between the city’s cultural complex, civic heritage, and the public sphere of the city life. Following the approach of Citizen Science which involves communities in the processes of knowledge production and policy change, the Hub invites the active participation of residents, students, artists, researchers, municipal agencies, and visitors. It supports a collective investment in urban, cultural, and environmental matters—framing artistic production as a shared, accessible everyday concern. with a sense of place-making and civic engagement. A trace of purpose is left between the new cultural district and the old municipal complex that it was born into. In addition to that, significant parts of the existing Stadhuis are preserved through adaptive reuse to host a community of artists-in-residence. This way, the new district ensures daytime as well as evening activities. Theatre, cinema and performance venues are framed with everyday life, and informal activities by Amersfoort’s own people and impromptu artistic movements. The project aims to expand upon the Keientrekkers initiative and study of the Amersfoort municipality (2020). It aims to the empowerment and support of individuals and organization to start cultural, social, or community-based projects in a bottom-up approach. The project, currently, lacks visibility and network, as well as a physical place to manifest itself in the city. Cultural and municipal agencies, currently based in the periph-

ery or lacking facilities (such as Amersfoort in C.), would benefit from this, by having a space of interaction with the public.<sup>2</sup>

OLBW adopts an experimental approach where cultural events production and organization, goes hand-in-hand with cultural literacy and accessibility, and the cultivation of a sense of place-making, and belonging, by energizing an existing social resource.

### Context, and urban integration

In the notion of Townscape<sup>3</sup> Gordon Cullen wrote about the “value of the incident in a street” and the “art of relationships” in the urban setting. Following this line of thought, the design acts as a stepping stone in the larger urban and cultural landscape. From North to South, OLBW connects the Nieuwe Stad towards the old Varkensmarkt neighbourhood through a car-free passage. This starts with the Achter Davidshof park –enriched with artistic installations– and into the New Stadhuisplein, in-between the main Theatre & Cinema Complexes. Across the walkable avenue of Molenstraat, the urban courtyards of the Citizen’s Hub mirror the urban setting of the street market of Hellestraat behind it. Along the way, the finely stitched sequence of public spaces invites movement, interaction, and pause—breaking down the threshold between observer and performer. This central axis is also an ecological corridor. Green and porous surfaces boost biodiversity, manage water, and extend the city’s green ring—improving environmental resilience, local health and quality of life. On the other hand, the East to West axis is approached more formally, providing orientation through sightlines, tree rows, and height accents. The transition between the traffic-oriented Central Station area and the historic city centre is eased, contextualizing the new additions along this route. The new development reflects and supports the intimate scale of its surroundings while accommodating powerful new functions and inviting users to participate. In a higher level, a contemporary curvilinear roofscape tops the various buildings of the new development, referencing a characteristic element of the city of Amersfoort, and giving it a literal twist while maintaining its humane scale and aesthetics.

On the pedestrian level, the urban interaction enhances and strengthens the relationship between passers-by and the people actively using the buildings’ programs. A metaphor is drawn between architecture and theatre, suggesting that architecture provides the setting or stage for all aspects of human life. Buildings, urban spaces and landscapes are not passive backdrops; they actively shape behaviour, interaction, and memory. People wandering through the building, look at what is happening within, not as passive subjects but active performers in the entire sequence. The people flow in a dynamic dance throughout the outdoor and indoor landscape: the foyer, the roof promenade, the flat theatre, the creative hub and the former Stadhuis. The making of artworks, the design process or the rehearsal of artistic pieces, becomes part of the “performance” itself. The boundaries between inside and outside are blurred; buildings act as a stage where Brecht’s “fourth wall” is broken, blending performer and performance or passers-by and artists.

### Historical viewpoints, connections, and interpretations

The project extends within a protected historic cityscape, surrounded by listed monuments and layered urban histories. At the core of the Townscape concept is the restoration of key viewpoints. This is achieved through the fanning windows that break down the facades and volumes of the large Theatre and Film complexes. They are oriented towards historical points of interest, most notably toward the Onze Lieve Vrouwetoren, the Observant Cloister, and the canal bridge & gate to the medieval centre. Even while enjoying a theatre play, or going up the stairs to a movie theatre, the new buildings offer sightings toward the existing urban context on new stand points. The design proposal also connects the dense urban fabric of the city with the clarity and modularity of contemporary urban developments—through the hierarchy and sequencing of spaces as public events. The historic direction of the Hellestraat is re-established as an urban pedestrian promenade, reinforced by breaking down large volumes into smaller architectural elements, pavilions, canopies, art installations, and urban furniture. The theatre and cinema volumes anchor its passage, re-articulating the contours of Westsingel. The Stadhuisplein becomes a new reference point in this urban ecology, attracting activities as the center of an artistic neighbourhood on the grounds of the former municipal complex. Lastly, the reused Stadhuis itself is transformed with ateliers and common spaces that assign an urban scenery to its interior. A new pedestrian passage towards the Achter Davidshof park, evoking relations to Amersfoort’s city gates.

### Phasing & Program: A Social Gesamtkunstwerk

The development of the project is envisioned to compliment the concept of the design as a collective Gesamtkunstwerk—inviting varied actors in a collective process of placemaking to connect long-term planning with short-term and creative adaptability.

#### Phase 1 – Placemaking and Social Resourcing

The project begins with the reuse of the western volume along Torenstraat into temporary residences, the rest of the Hellestraat 24 complex will be demolished. The logistics of the Sint Jorisplein shopping center will be rerouted through the Torenstraat to make a pedestrian friendly Molenstraat. During this phase the theater underground parking will be constructed south of Molenstraat. On top, at the heart of this site, flexible wooden structures emerge, forming the Citizen’s Hub core of a performing arts podium, that signals the start of the resourcing process. Temporary programs on the north side support this activation through events and workshops in the park connecting to the Stadsring.

#### Phase 2 – Theatre, Film, and Adaptive Reuse

After two years the municipality moves into their new residence therefore allowing the transformation of the Stadhuis. To begin: an expo hall, horeca, ateliers, and artist residencies take shape within the former Stadhuis. The Pi de Bruin building and the annex of the Stadhuis are demolished to start the construction of the film house, first, then the theater. The pedestrian bridge of the Stadhuis will be preserved and repurposed as

part of the new theater. Minimal surgical interventions to the existing Stadhuis allow its transformation. A new passage towards the Achter Davidshof park and a new entrance towards the Westsingel will create a flawless integration into the city's pedestrian network.

### Phase 3 – Cultural District & Network

After seven years all major construction has been completed, and the cultural district has come to its glory. The cultural activities of the Citizen Hub, artists in residence, theater and cinema have formed a resilient socio-cultural network within the city center of Amersfoort, linking the cultural industry with public engagement. Here, the planned temporary use for the Stadhuis (as described within the brief) ends. This is a moment to assess its future.

### Phase 4 – Vision for the Future

We believe that it is the best-case scenario to bring all the locally resourced culture into permanence. To keep this resilient locally rooted cultural district alive, so it will keep being able to crowd source productions, foster movements, and incubate artists, startup companies, and organizations. We believe that the architecture and the character of the Stadhuis is significant and therefore important to be preserved in the long term. In an ideal future scenario, we envision the Cultural Hub and the artists in residence to evolve also into an academy of arts, to guarantee the permanent long term cultural future for the Stadhuis. We foresee that in need of increased capacity the Stadhuis can be topped up, while the entire underground level can be integrated with logistical and technical facilities.

### Theatre + Film House

Given the programmatic requirements, phasing, and limited plot size, the design for the Theatre Complex turns into an ambitious spatial challenge. Nevertheless, the project commits to the Dutch tradition of theatres as integral parts of the city. In Phase 2, with part of the Stadhuis demolished, the theatre begins to take center stage. To secure maximum interaction with the city the dedicated theatre halls are raised on the first floor freeing up the ground floor for the foyer, restaurant and café, as well as a free flowing halls, an activity-room adjacent to pedestrian walkway, and a flat-floor hall with an openable façade to the Stadhuisplein, literally extending their activities to the public. With these spaces designed as indoor public rooms of reciprocal exchange people are not only drawn to the Theatre to see a play, but to meet and interact with each other.

The main hall is a venue dedicated to theatre plays of contemporary standards and specifications, with a capacity of 1000 seats and a height that peaks the new development. Situated at the corner of Stadsring and Molenstraat its characteristic volume marks the entrance to the city centre. The medium hall (500 seats), designed as a flexible space for different kinds of performances is also expressive in its urban standing, rotated towards the Onze Lieve Vrouwentoren, with its picture window framing the tower as a unique live backdrop scenery. At the same time the rotating gesture of the theatre allows for

the continuation of the historical route of Hellestraat into the public space of the Stadhuisplein.

Together the two halls will bring a diverse cultural program within the district. The flat floor hall, activity-room, and sub rooms play an additional role in making culture openly accessible to the people of Amersfoort. They allow for all kinds of events, festivals, grass root art movements, local performance groups into the world of the theatre, and to spill out onto the Stadhuisplein. The building steps down toward the public square, echoing the massing of the existing Stadhuis. This terracing is not only respectful in scale but creates accessible green roofs, outdoor gathering spaces, and a continuous public rooftop promenade connecting the new theatre with the existing civic buildings.

In order not to obstruct the view and connection from Hellenstraat to the Stadhuisplein, the Film House is designed separate from the Theatre Complex – as an independent building – for film, discussion and recreation housing six screening rooms in its upper floors, above a spacious lobby and a lively ground-floor café. The volume relates to the historical expression of the Westsingel and respects its intimate scale as an embankment with buildings along it. The theater has an expressive roof shape that uses the same principle as the important public buildings in the city center; the peak marks its place but the volume breaks down into smaller pieces towards the public domain. Along Molenstraat the volume of both the Film House and the Theatre Complex pick up the height lines and verticality of the buildings across the street. The symmetry draws the perspective inwards and guide people from the station, towards the inner-city gate, and into the city center of Amersfoort.

The materials of the theater relate to its surroundings; with a base of possible brickwork and wooden window frames that relate to the expressive windows of the Stadhuis. Higher up the materials feel lighter; ceramics with a slight reflective quality. It is a design for the city and part of the city, that blends in with the historical city center.

### Adaptive Reuse: Stadhuis

The 1970s Stadhuis by Van Kranendonk holds a distinctive civic presence, shaped by fortress-like geometry, sloped walls, and brick façades articulated with embrasure-like openings. Its stepped form and vertical circulation cores evoke historical fortifications, while enclosing a central courtyard as an introverted urban room. The proposal preserves most of the structure, removing only the southern volume to make space for the new theatre. Interior interventions remain minimal: lightweight partitions are reconfigured to accommodate exhibitions, workshops, horeca, and artist studios. A new public corridor—tracing the historical axis of Hellestraat—cuts through the ground floor and is doubled as an art passage, transforming circulation into a curatorial experience. At its northern edge, a wooden bridge connects to the park, reinforcing the north-south urban spine and repositioning the Stadhuis as a contemporary city gate. New architectural elements—including an entrance box and art passage insertions—materialized in stainless steel and glass, offering a restrained and surgical contrast to the origi-

nal brown brick and timber. These subtle additions reflect the strategy of precise, reversible transformation. This reuse phase becomes a catalyst, drawing users into the district and anchoring a new cultural ecosystem. The building's future remains open—adaptable to evolving needs, whether as an arts institute, cultural hub, or hybrid platform. Its adaptable strategy prioritizes time, flexibility, and feedback—recasting Stadhuis' heritage into a living civic framework.

### The Citizen's Hub

The Citizen's Hub forms a small urban district with clusters of free-standing buildings in an intimate setting, built on circular and biobased design principles. Their compact footprint and robust first-floor promenade with shared cores enable flexible, phased construction and adaptation. Each unit operates autonomously, allowing tailored soundproofing and lighting for diverse cultural uses like music, dance, photography, and cinema; as well as scale: from individual to collective studios and learning spaces. Intertwining streets create multifunctional “in-between” spaces that gradually expose activities from private to public. A central open auditorium serves as both gathering space and main circulation. The reused Torenstraat building anchors the ensemble, visually linked by a timber grid-frame and adapted for workspaces and housing.

### Public Space & Landscape

The design of public spaces organizes paved and vegetated areas, creating a flattened walkscape of green areas, squares, streets, passageways, inner courtyards and small-scale gardens. This unifies the project and strengthens its approach for a N-S green corridor, and an E-W walkable avenue with porous green patches and common spaces. Existing greenery is conserved as much as possible, including in the Stadhuisplein, while a new planting scheme of a variety of native trees, shrubs, and herb adds biodiversity and seasonal change, for shade and visual comfort. Permeable pathways of brick and stone tile make use of materials from repurposed or demolished buildings and assimilate local paving patterns contextually to the new situation. The Stadhuisplein, as the main “urban interior” hosts ephemeral outdoor structures and urban furniture, responding to events. Directional lines in the pavement orient pedestrian flow, through the sequence of public rooms, while green urban patches negotiate the relationship of the surrounding Stadsring with the inner urban core. The same paving material extends also in the buildings, assigning a public character to them, and inviting people in. The concept of the townscape is continued this way in the form of an urban “English-style” landscape, informal, and naturalistic that encourages people to wander in-between and through the cultural buildings. This idea is also extended vertically, with a publicly accessible promenade on the roof of the Theatre complex, and its open-air terraces.

### Parking & Logistics

To prioritize pedestrians and strengthen ties to the historic city center, vehicle access is redirected away from Molenstraat. Theatre logistics enter via Stadsring, connecting to underground service levels and the main stage. Parking and deliveries

are rerouted to Torenstraat, which already functions logistically, freeing central and the southern site from traffic. A dedicated 50-spot garage underneath the citizen's hub, will serve the theatre, later linking directly to the foyer. This strategy fosters a pedestrian-friendly environment where cars are occasional guests, preserving the site's human scale.

### Conclusion

The OLBW cultural district is conceived as an urban theatre—where the passer-by is rendered a flâneur in a vibrant townscape, becoming both observer and performer. Architecture acts not as backdrop for city life but an active urban force, inviting curiosity, participation, and shared experience. As people move through squares, gardens, foyers, rooftops, and studios, their presence animates the urban and civic landscape. This choreography of encounters affirms a collective commitment: to culture, coexistence, and the commons. More than a cluster of cultural buildings, OLBW is a spatial promise—where the city's own rhythms are recorded and imprinted into the new design, and where creative art and life takes common root and grow. Architecture expands into the public realm, embedding history and culture into the fabric of everyday life as something to be lived, and shared openly.

### Sources

- 1- Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985)
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- 3-Cullen, Gordon. *The Concise Townscape*. Oxford: Architectural Press, 1961.