

CAPRICCIO: BEYOND THE ANALOGUE

The existing built environment houses an enormous potential of space, material, and energy. The careful employment of currently underused structures forms a crucial asset in addressing a variety of issues such as greenhouse emissions, material scarcity or the housing crisis. Especially buildings from the last decades have often been built in highly durable building materials such as concrete, limestone and brick and contain lots of space, labour, investments, emissions, complex social and ecological structures and future cultural value. Recently, there has been a growing effort to stop the still common practice of demolition. In an attempt to recognize our planetary limitations, we can no longer afford to waste any cubic meter of material.

Because of this we were both startled and intrigued by the story of Amicitia, a building that was only built in 2001(!) and whose very existence is already a point of discussion. Developmental plans by architects and owners already openly embrace scenarios that call for demolition, a call that is echoed in verbal explanations by the municipality and by local residents in response to newspaper articles.

Although we do not endorse this idea of demolition, we do understand the underlying problems. Although the former 'society' reveals a long and grand social and public history, the more recent Amicitia building can hardly count on any public appreciation and knows a somewhat lesser 'grand' narrative. It is a history that, unfortunately, consists of many failures: Amicitia fails to attract people, to retain businesses, to create a vibrant cityscape and to continue the surrounding historical and ecological structures. Both owner, renters, users and municipality have been trying to solve these issues in many ways. Therefore, any alternative to demolition will only be taken seriously if it addresses these problems convincingly.

But how can we design in a way that preserves the existing building while effectively addressing all these issues? And what does this mean for our methods of designing buildings? Cases like Amicitia call for a new way of

thinking and designing. Although the debate against demolition is omnipresent, less attention has been given to its implications for architectural design methods. This calls for a shift away from the sometimes dogmatic approach rooted in a formalistic analogy of a singular historical interpretation of a building, and – instead – advocates for a broader, value-based perspective – one where conservation is pursued for many different reasons.

Our proposal therefore takes the multitude of these perspectives and values as a starting point. It is designed as a varied collection of urban and architectural fragments that each address certain issues, and around whose conflicts and complexities arises a diverse and pluriform architecture. This design method allows us to think in a fragmented way, determining what is needed for each place specifically, consciously avoiding the abstraction of these specificities into a conceptual whole. The design proposal simultaneously reasons from both the courtyard, current inhabitants, the structure of the park, the perspective of the owner, the demands from the cityscape and the needs of users. With this, we plea for preserving buildings in a way that answer to all the specific needs of everyone involved, composing an architecture that grows from a multiplicity of communal values.

Amicitia - embedding the geometric into the organic

The current Amicitia shows exactly why it is necessary to design from a multitude of perspectives. Its main flaw is that it is designed from one – rather cosmic – perspective. It is a perfectly geometric and symmetrical shape (whereas the surroundings are not) organised around an underground shopping street facing the surroundings with its back, and with housing far above. Particularly at the crucial corners it fails to shape, address and activate the urban space. Important sightlines are blocked by walls, fences or volume. And the historic facade and much of the public space are uninviting to access.

In our design proposal, however, we maintain the entire structure, for – apart from its flaws – we also see

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tremendous quality in the ensemble: the building provides dwellings with lots of façade generating various views on the city. Its wings unveil little depth, allowing for generously lit floor plans and an abundance of shared space on the galleries that is appropriated by residents. The raised courtyard allows for a social collective of family houses providing them with privacy and a safe playground. The vast basement creates a giant room in the city, without taking away any public space. And the tall floors, height differences and solid materials make a transformation very worthwhile.

By covering the shopping street with a landscape of vegetation the stately relation between building and surrounding park is re-established. By integrating patios into this landscape and addressing the basement with an entrance on the level of the park it becomes employable for more diverse functions than only shops. In our proposal, not a single household will have to move out of their home since all dwellings will be maintained. The geometric shape will be nested in the urban fabric by connecting it on all sides to the streets and squares that it borders, in a way that shapes and defines - instead of weakens - the urban sequence of space. Since there is a clear distinction between the quality of the houses on the upper floors and the underutilized spaces underneath, our interventions take place specifically on the first 6 meters above ground level (adding two building layers underneath existing dwelling windows). A volume will protrude from these underutilized areas, much like many other geometric morphologies in medieval city centres have over time been extended by volume at unused surfaces in order to weave together monument with urban form.



In our analyses we found many dualities : between monument and urban fabric, natural and cultural structures, block and pavilion, city and periphery, radial and concentric, inside and outside and highrise and lowrise. The character of all these dichotomies is continued in order to create a composite part of the city. The main duality to cover this diversity will be that between the public and vibrant front along the ringpark and the tranquil seclusion of the housing courtyards at the back. A horizontal division between functions and housing is thus made, instead of vertically organizing it as is done in adjacent shopping streets.

Parkside: Amicitia reinvented

One of the great values of the front side is the ‘original’ façade of the Society. It is a physical reminder of the socio-cultural history of the place and provides the site with a unique and iconic identity. In the current composition of the building – however – it is subordinate to a wall of building volume that absorbs it. In that sense the 2001 addition reminds more of the former fortification – with its bastion-shape and its shopping-trench in front – than it reminds of the original society. The proposal is therefore inspired by (neo-)classical composition techniques and typologies used for accentuating public buildings and palaces that are absorbed by their urban surroundings. By adding a carefully sculptured volume that flanks the Amicitia façade, the emphasis is placed back on the original building again by introducing a kind of forecourt. The shape of the extensions continues some essential features of the original building such as the staggering movement of wings, risalto, corner-pavilions and lesenes. This integrates the now somewhat anachronistic façade into a grounded spatial composition. Although the overall proportion of this composition relates to the large scale developments outside the ring on the one hand, its articulation into three individual volumes also relates to the scale of the opposite villa’s and the ‘meisjesschool’ on the other hand.

In this volumetric layout the historic façade functions as a recognizable heart to enter a functional cluster housing a variety of public functions. For its programmatic composition we took inspiration from the communal engagement of the former society Amicitia (and Maatschappij tot Nut van ‘t Algemeen) that aimed for

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development of all layers of society through sharing knowledge and skill. To reintroduce this atmosphere of commonality, we propose a diverse mix of functions bringing together social, cultural and commercial interests, in order for various people to encounter. By making a flexible cluster of functions around a central communal lobby, providing access to both wings and basement, the site can become a gathering point of community engagement again. A variety of studios can be flexibly used for functions like workshops, daycare, tourist information, dance classes, social hubs, VR-gaming, fitness, yoga, small-scale healthcare, workplaces, coaching or small education whilst also housing existing functions like the nail studio and anime shop and enlarging the current bicycle storage into an underground mobility hub. The large wing underground – at the back – holds a multifunctional auditorium for fairs, small performances, expositions, meetings, lectures, corporate events and debates. This cluster is, finally, organized around a hotel and restaurant, that holds a key position in the overall coordination of the several organisations.

The crossing of the concentric green structure and the radial cultural structure of historic lines is another important resource in our design strategy. By providing a corner accent in the volume that divides it equally to both sides, the transition from the one axis to the other is guided. To answer to the value of the squares on both the Arnhemsestraat and Utrechtsestraat, defining walls are erected that relate to the height and scale of surrounding buildings. The project site is thus integrated in a sequence of squares along these streets that culminates at the Varkensmarkt. In this chain the site marks the transition from the walkable historic centre to the high-density station milieu around, being both stepping stone, departure and gateway. It constitutes a continuation of functional programme that links the radial streets inside the ring to the radials around. This conflicts however with the perspective from the ring park, also needing a continuation. This dichotomy is a source for combining the best qualities of both nature and culture at this vibrant crossing by not letting either one prevail over the other. A biodiverse collection of native plants is therefore introduced on the square, growing ever denser towards Amicitia into an lively park. Although we envision and urge the former waterway to be reintroduced and the

ringroad to be narrowed from over 6 (!) to 2 lanes (like other sections along the historic core) we think the park should not depend on this operation and thus provide it with a size that continues it already.

Courtyard: appropriation through proximity

The backside contains completely different qualities. It connects more to other calm concentric and transversal dwelling contexts like the Valkestraat, Zonnehof or Aldegondestraat. Building on the character of the small streets and facades throughout the historic city center of Amersfoort, a landscape of streets, squares and sightlines is continued. Instead of maintaining a large anonymous courtyard, it is split in several strongly vibrant smaller ones. Inspired by the morphology of Dutch courtyards and Flemish beguinages (such as the large one in Mechelen), a social cityscape is introduced that evokes a sense of human scale. This relatable size of the space leaves room for appropriation and different kinds of purpose.



Two new volumes are introduced into the courtyard in order to convey this hierarchy of space, on the one hand catalysing liveliness in the courtyard while leaving room for further development of the existent edge containing the back entrances of several shops like Hema and van Haren (a development already done on the other side by Han van Zwieten). The floor of the existing courtyard in Amicitia is lowered in order to develop dwellings on the ground floor, while restoring the ‘Achter de Arnhemse Poortwal’ connection by continuing the street through the courtyard. The intricate and porous dwelling atmosphere allows for activity during the full length of the day and thus complements the monofunctional shopping streets around.

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The dwellings are oriented on a walkable public space, achieved through largely banning logistics from the courtyard in the same way as has been done at the Varkensmarkt, using specified timeslots in which shops can be supplied on their front side. This brings about a wanderable cityscape that integrates the existing small shops with the new houses, a landscape that is crowned by the silhouette of the 'Onze Lieve Vrouwetoren'. The space is thereby lined with the more public functions of the dwellings such as a kitchen and dining room. This dwelling space can also be turned into a small pantry ensuring a future-proof combination of living and working from home. The proposal encompasses a mix of apartments and small 2-level houses on the ground floor, providing a diverse combination with the existing family-oriented dwellings. The more private functions such as living room and bedrooms are placed on the height of a split level (in the existing building) or on the first floor. On top of these dwellings a multitude of apartments will be added, wielding the existing circulation structure for access. The heart of the area is enhanced with a common space that is shared by the residents and can be used for facilities like washing machines, cooking, working or recreating together, since many dwellings are rather compact.

Whereas the new additions to the courtyard measure a maximum of 3 layers and an added roof, the existing Amicitia measures more than 4 layers in height. In order to furnish it with a relatable scale we will employ the act of adding windows on the ground floor as incentive for reusing concrete elements to lower the visual 'eave height' - being used as kind of spolia. Elements of brick will be harvested and reused as a whole, being newly pointed, painted and cemented with durable materials like chalk mortar, generating a sense of individuality in the commonality of the units. This operation can also be used to reinsulate the existing building. For the inner structure wooden elements will be used for the new additions, building on the grid of the existing structure.

Conclusively we will thus be resourcing both material and existing social and natural structures in order to weave together all buildings into a composite whole.

Process, durability and feasibility

The plan, naturally, depends not so much only on the physical design, but more on the participative initiatives preceding an eventual implementation. Building a collective of organisations around current stakeholders – sharing a drive for improvement of the site, will be an essential precondition for the success. By starting with small scale interventions a gradual shift towards the proposed plan can be started. The plan, by its plural nature, is able to adapt to additional perspectives that will undoubtedly come up during the process. These will only further enrich the proposed architecture.

Since the proposition consists of adding 4 singular volumes, the city and much of the existing programme can be used during construction, not only being financially but also socially profitable for the inhabitants. After building the two new volumes in the courtyard, the wings can be added. Conserving the complete existing building saves a lot of investments, without question being more affordable than demolition because of the recent building year (thus being very different from preservation of low quality construction from earlier periods). By maintaining the basement plus ramps and adding the compact yet considerable volumes that also partly share facades with the existing building, a structurally repetitive ensemble is erected that benefits from the reused materials and existing circulation on site. The light construction even rests largely on existing loadbearing grids, conclusively allcreating a feasible business case.

By increasing biodiversity, using the basement for water retention, deploying wood and chalk mortar absorbing CO₂, planting trees to combat urban heating, using porous materials for animals to nest, and using durable energy on the many roofs and underground - an enduring place is created for intertwining nature and culture at this crossroad.

Finally, an amalgam so emerges that marks the transition from the grand former society façade and extends to the park, crossing, square, street and courtyards to dissolve into the eclectic surroundings, taking in many identities and leaving room for integrating even more in the future, consequently both programmatically, socially and culturally nesting itself into the urban fabric of Amersfoort.