



# TO BE SOMEONE FOR SOMEONE ELSE

The role of architect(ure)s in counteracting homelessness

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Master's thesis in Architecture and Planning Beyond Sustainability  
Design Activism Beyond Borders  
Spring 2022

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# Acknowledgement

## A very big thank you to...

**Sophie Crapez** and all the workers at **Comme Chez Nous** for welcoming me to their premises and giving me so much of their time and precious knowledge.

The **homeless people** I talked to for three of the richest hours of my life. Thank you for sharing with me your time, experience, and wishes for the future.

The **street educators** that accompanied me in the streets of Charleroi and showed me their everyday work with homeless people.

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**Shea Hagy, Liane Thuvander and Emilio Brandao** for your guidance, support, and mind-opening visions.

This master thesis investigates the role of architects and architecture in counteracting homelessness. For this study, the project takes place in the context of Charleroi, a Belgian city particularly impacted by a wide range of social issues, including homelessness.

The latter's definition is differentiated from the term houselessness, which means not having a roof over one's head. Homeless here includes all people, houseless or not, who lack a place to call home.

As simple as the definition may seem, homelessness is a highly complex topic. It is thus crucial to have a deep understanding of what it entails before trying to find solutions. Knowledge is built by reaching out to and collaborating with organisations confronted with homelessness daily. Using reference literature, projects, and movies, conducting interviews, and going into the field are additional ways of enquiring about the subject.

The design proposal is based on reality because of the need for contextualised understanding. It is conceived on a plot acquired to build a centre for homelessness and is inspired by the testimonies of local stakeholders.

Homelessness is deeply related to the social aspect of sustainable development because it is about giving the right to a segregated population to simply be, as anyone else in society has the right to. Working with homelessness is working with social gaps, and reducing those is essential to living in a more just – and thus more sustainable – society.

Knowing this, the outcome of this thesis is the design of a community centre dedicated to social bonding, autonomy development, inclusion, and empowerment of the homeless population in the centre of Charleroi. By designing such a place, the project aims at stepping away from prejudices and being norm-critical. It also aims at turning around the current marginalised position society puts homeless people in. Most of all, it does not aim at changing who homeless people are but rather at giving them a space to be who they want to become.

Keywords: Homelessness, Social Sustainability, Empowerment, Community

# Student background

## EDUCATION

### Chalmers University of Technology – 2020-2022

#### Autumn semester – 2020

Sustainable development and the design professions  
Planning and design for sustainability in a local context

#### Spring semester – 2021

Crash course: Beyond sustainability  
History and method: Building climatology for sustainable design  
Sustainable architectural design

#### Autumn semester – 2021

Master's Thesis preparation courses 1 & 2  
Social-ecological Urbanism

#### Spring semester – 2022

Master's Thesis

### UCL Faculty of Architecture, Brussels – 2016-2019

Bachelor's degree in Architecture

## EXPERIENCE

One year schooling in graphic design, Charleroi – 2019-2020

Construction worker on an ecological participative building site – 2018

# Reading instructions

The reading of the booklet is straightforward as it follows the order presented in the contents.

The particularity that requires explaining is that a series of quotes written in a large and bold font – such as the one presented below – have been placed throughout the booklet. These come from the conversation I had with three homeless people which is – with the rest of the research – the foundation for the final outcome of the thesis. They are free translations from French as this is the language in which the discussion was held.

You are now all set to proceed with your reading. I hope you will enjoy it.

**TRUST IS SO IMPORTANT ON THE STREETS,  
BUT IT IS VERY HARD TO HAVE. WHEN YOU  
GIVE YOUR TRUST TO SOMEONE AND THEY  
BREAK IT, NOTHING HURTS MORE. BUT  
THEN YOU KNOW THAT YOU SHOULD NEVER  
TRUST THAT PERSON AGAIN.**

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# INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the general framework of this thesis is presented: what is the author's position on the topic through both written and graphical manifestos; why this topic has been chosen and how it relates to design activism; what are the main aims and objectives of this work; what questions are addressed and how; and finally, what are the delimitations.

EVERYONE DESERVES TO BE **SEEN, HEARD AND RESPECTED**

BEING **IN CHARGE** OF YOUR LIFE IS YOUR **RIGHT**

HUMAN BEINGS **ARE NOT** INVISIBLE

WE HAVE TO AVOID AND BREAK **PREJUDICES**

KINDNESS IS **NOT** A WEAKNESS

SOME OF US NEED **MORE TIME** THAN OTHERS

IN THE END, ALL WE NEED IS TO **BE SOMEONE FOR SOMEONE ELSE**

# Manifesto



Figure 1: Graphical manifesto, made by the author

# Why this topic?

There are different reasons for the choice of this topic.

Firstly, I have lived my whole life close to Charleroi. I used to go there often, and I have witnessed its decay over the years, with a growing feeling of injustice, inequality, and insecurity. Homelessness has been a big issue for as long as I can remember, and it keeps on getting worse.

Secondly, Charleroi's authorities have big plans for the city. They want to make it more attractive and more dynamic. According to the city's Bouwmeester (city's architect) Georgios Maillis, "Charleroi is not content to simply be The Place to See, it is becoming The Place to Live" (Charleroi Bouwmeester, 2018). On paper, it looks great, but all these vast projects will take years to be completed, and homelessness is an emergency; actions must be taken now.

**To the elected representatives: "Open your eyes on precarity. If your priorities should focus on human beings, I know that in parallel you have to meet all the city's actors' expectations. Restoring buildings or the entire city, it's all very well. Looking after the economy is admittedly essential, but supporting social outcasts is an emergency."**

Denis Uvier, 2019, p. 148

Thirdly, homelessness is a universal problem. It has been there for centuries, maybe even more. Still, no universal solution has been found yet. Given its complex nature, that is not surprising. What makes a person homeless is not just the lack of housing but a lack of a place to call home, which makes the problem even more challenging to solve. To try and find solutions to this injustice, it is essential to dare to be creative and innovative and iterate. One should acknowledge that they do not have all the answers but at least that they are trying to do

something. They should then analyse the results and see what has worked and has not (Teixeira, 2020).

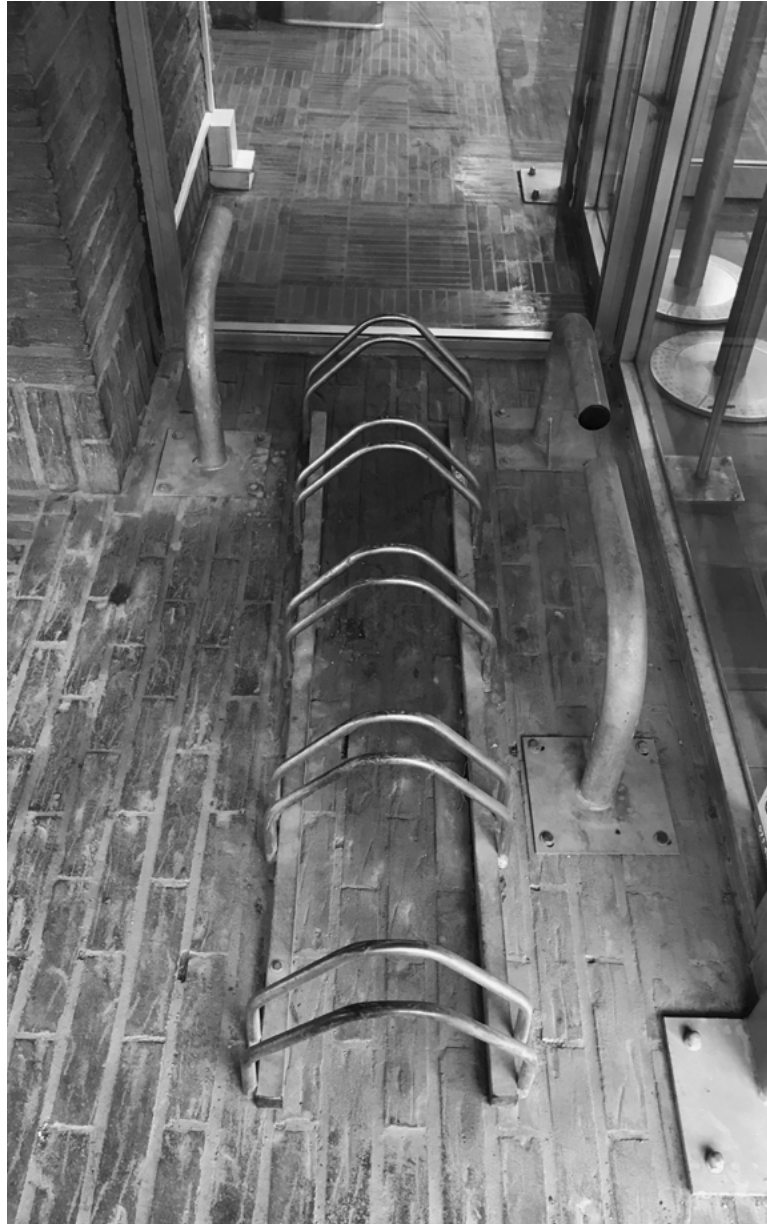
Moreover, the right to adequate housing is stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as part of the art. 25 on the right to an adequate standard of living (OHCHR, n.d.). Even though this thesis is not focusing on the question of housing, this shows that building for the homeless population is more than giving people a roof over their heads. It is about fulfilling their rights as human beings. It is about fairness and ethics.

Then, homelessness is a crucial issue in developing a more sustainable society. As the 1st and 10th United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) state, essential aspects to focus on for our future are No Poverty and Reduced Inequalities (United Nations, 2015). What is more unequal than having to spend the night on the streets or in a shelter while others are comfortably sleeping in the safety of their own homes? Rough sleeping is one of the most extreme faces of poverty. Therefore, in my opinion, homelessness is an issue to prioritise as it involves key factors in the transition towards a more sustainable future. It requires tackling the questions of poverty and reduction of inequality.

Finally, elements of hostile architecture are implemented in different places in the urban environment to prevent homeless people from settling. While these interventions – like armrests in the middle of benches or the ones shown on the pictures to the right – might appear insignificant at first glance, their unfriendly purpose becomes clear when one starts having a critical look at them. This is definitely not how cities should approach the issue.

**"Our architectural projects have many interventions of hostility and very few of hospitality."**

Romullo Baratto, 2022



Figures 2-3: Photos of interventions prohibiting homeless people to settle, made by the author

# Design activism

This thesis relates to design activism by addressing the needs of an excluded part of the population and rejecting the unacceptable situation they are in. Tackling the topic of homelessness is an opportunity to make a difference, act to make the world a better place, and bring up the subject of social responsibility.

This thesis is partly inspired by the ideologies of the Rural Studio founded by Samuel Mockbee in Alabama, USA. The documentary Citizen Architect, which follows students and teachers from the program, is very inspiring. Their approach to architecture as a social art, centred on people is truly motivating. The idea is not to impose anything on anyone but rather to give space for people to live the way they want to live, to feel empowered and in control of their environment (S. Wainwright Douglas, 2010).

Homelessness provides a particular form of freedom. One is not attached to anything anymore (W., personal communication, February 25th, 2022). However, that freedom is often hindered by a series of rules and laws. This thesis researches how architects can respond to that need for freedom and give homeless people a space where they can act as free agents, in charge of their life and their future.

*"The key ethical responsibility of the architect lies not in the refinement of the object as static visual product, but as contributor to the creation of empowering spatial, and hence social, relationships in the name of others."*

Jeremy Till, 2009, p. 178

PEOPLE SITTING BEHIND A DESK  
CAN'T TRULY UNDERSTAND WHAT  
WE GO THROUGH. YOU HAVE TO BE  
ON THE FIELD TO REALISE WHAT  
IS HAPPENING.

# Aims and Objectives

This thesis aims to bring to light an issue that most of us are aware of but know so little about.

The purpose of this thesis is to, through research and design, propose a place that allows for the empowerment and inclusion of homeless people. A place that meets their need for socialisation, where the connection between a person and their spatial environment is strengthened. A place that people can call home.

Charleroi certainly does not lack social services, and still, the situation keeps evolving the wrong way (W. & L., personal communication, February 25th, 2022). Why? Unfortunately, this question can not be answered now, but it clearly shows that something is missing. What if the architects could contribute to finding the answer? This is what the thesis aims at exploring.

The purpose of the design is a space used to create – but most importantly to sustain – social relationships, to provide a transition space needed for those who need time and support to get their life back on track, for whom change is not simple.

It is easy to fall into clichés when talking about homelessness. However, there are different types and causes of homelessness and various profiles with different needs; it is crucial to comprehend that. This thesis aims at tackling this complexity and breaking

prejudices. Moreover, it aims at changing the image that society has of homeless people and the one these people have of themselves. They often do not feel legitimate, do not feel like they belong, or that they have the right to make any decisions that will impact their environment. They often might not feel in control of what is happening around them. It is thus essential to foster opportunities for them to go out of their “known zone” and to finally, or again, be in charge of their life.

Also, it is a common opinion that housing is the ultimate solution to end homelessness. However, according to Peter Barber – a London-based architect who specialised in social housing – in an interview he gave for Dezeen at the beginning of this year, housing is essential. But it only scratches the surface of the problem. It is like a band-aid on the wound that is homelessness (Crook, 2022). As he says, *“Everyone bears responsibility for sorting the situation out”* and *“it’s important not just to see ourselves as architects. We are also citizens. And those two things go together”* (Barber, 2022). In my opinion, the role of architects should then go beyond the design of housing, which is something else that this thesis aims at investigating.

This thesis is for citizen architects, street inhabitants, social workers, and residents of Charleroi. It is for everyone who feels affected by the topic and wants to be part of the change.

# Research questions

This thesis aims at addressing the following questions:

**What can architects do in order to counteract homelessness?**

How can an architectural design create a feeling of home for a community?

What components can create space for autonomy, transition and empowerment of the homeless population?

# Methods

To develop this work, a series of methods have been used at different stages of the process and each with different purposes, as shown in the diagram below.

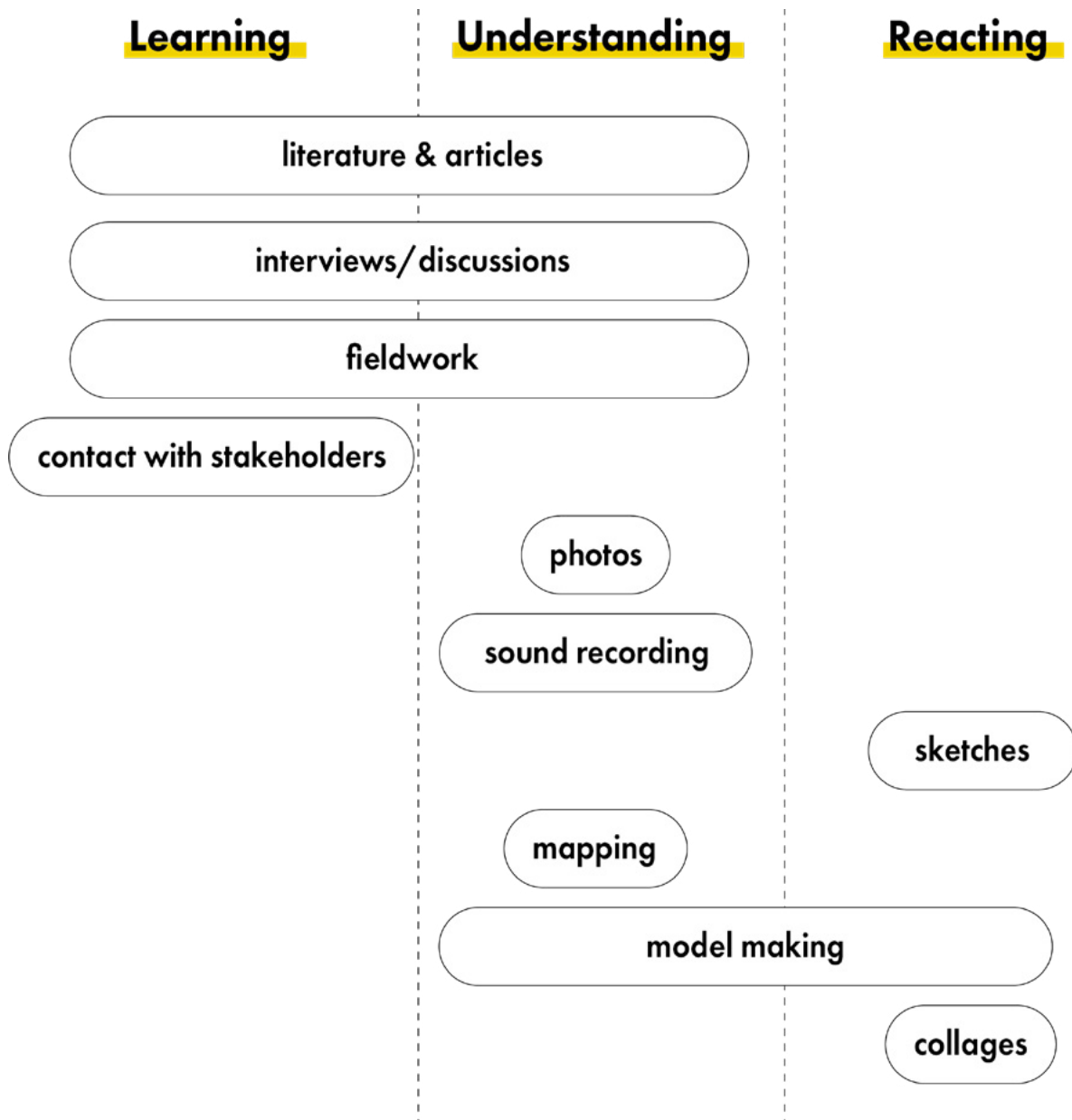


Figure 4: Methods diagram, made by the author

# Delimitations

The thesis focuses on six main topics: the question of sustainability, the city, homelessness, architects, agency, and finally, the design. For this particular research, some topics are considered slightly more critical than others, as seen in the diagram below.

The figures on the opposite page show the extent to which the different aspects of each topic are taken into consideration.

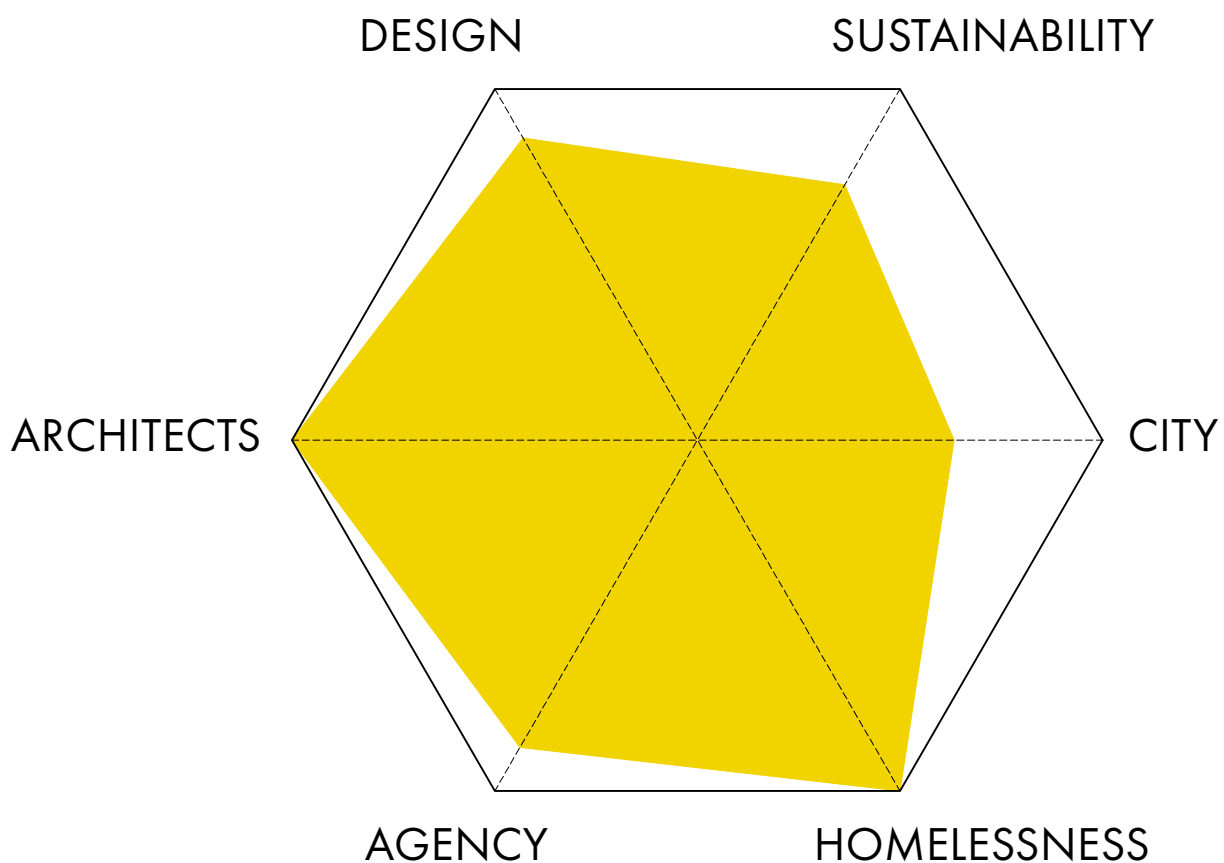
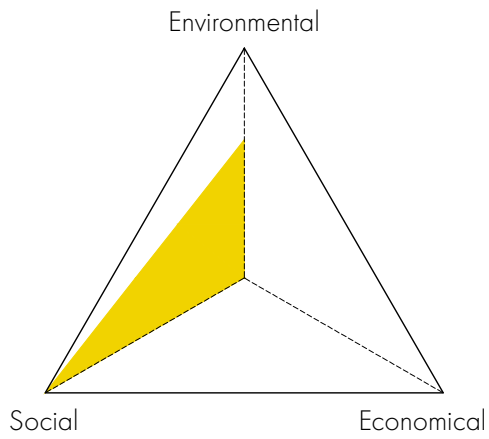
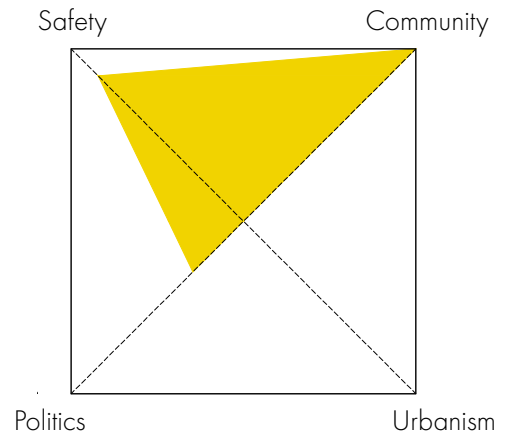


Figure 5: Delimitations diagram, made by the author

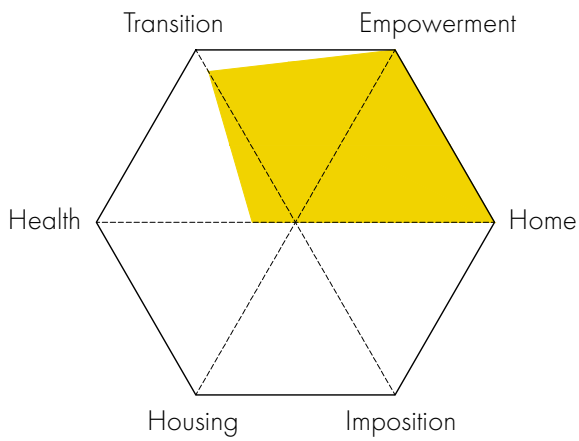
## SUSTAINABILITY



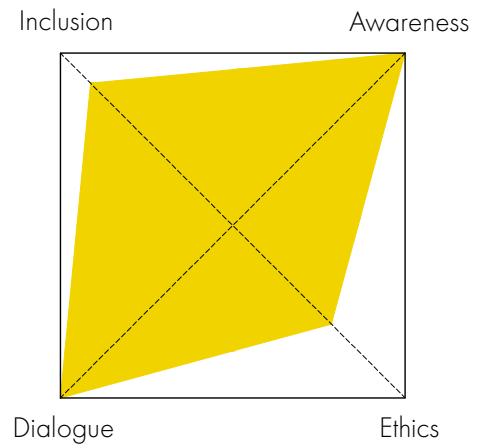
## CITY



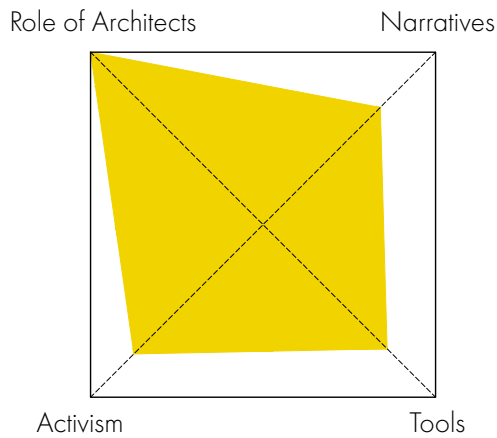
## HOMELESSNESS



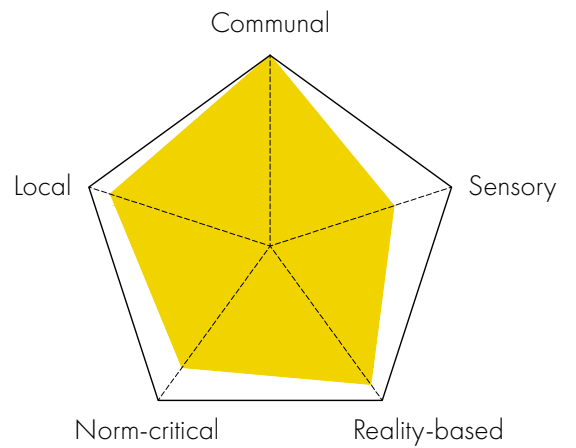
## AGENCY



## ARCHITECTS



## DESIGN





# BACKGROUND RESEARCH

This chapter presents a general research on the thesis main topics but also a more context-specific research through both literature and conversations with local actors. There also is a discussion on the definition of homelessness used for the purpose of this work. All these elements form the backbone for the design proposal.



A series of books and articles have been read to learn and understand the current situation of homelessness. In the following pages, some of them are briefly presented through the most relevant topics – for this research – that they tackle.

## Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory used to understand the needs behind humans' behavioural motivation. This theory has been represented graphically as a pyramid. It showcases the principle that the needs at the base are the foundation for motivation to arise. One can only move to the next need when the previous ones have been satisfied (Maslow, 1943).

Then what does it mean for homeless people? Their living conditions make it harder for them to satisfy all these needs. Throughout the reading of this thesis, it is essential to keep in mind that the needs and priorities of homeless people might be inherently different from everyone else's. The question here is to see whether the pyramid would then be different if it became the *Homelessness' hierarchy of needs*. Would the needs be the same but simply in a different order? Or would other needs come into the equation? Or else would it be the same? These questions will intentionally be kept unanswered because they are outside of the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, it is something to reflect on when approaching this topic and designing for homeless people.

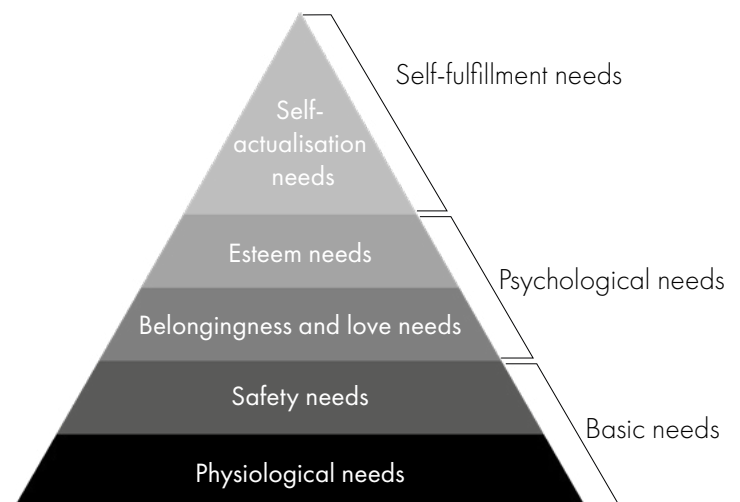


Figure 6: Hierarchy of needs, adapted from A. H. Maslow, 1943



Homelessness' Hierarchy of Needs

***The right to the city, D. Mitchell & Homelessness and the issue of freedom, J. Waldron***

What was particularly interesting in these two references was the description of the status of homeless people in the public space, the only space available to them.

The public space is a space where, by definition, everyone is allowed to be. Therefore by establishing laws on what is allowed or not allowed to do there, authorities exclude homeless people from it. Policies regulating behaviour in the public space do not annihilate homelessness but homeless people. They are very often based on the assumption that everyone has private housing where they can do what is not allowed in the public place. But this is far from being true. Therefore, they prevent homeless people from doing what they have to do to survive (Mitchell, 2003). Their basic needs cannot be satisfied in these conditions.

Such policies are sometimes applied to cities to keep a good image. For example, because tourists do not enjoy seeing poverty, local authorities remove homeless people from the streets to restore the "pretty picture." This type of attitude can be observed in many places around the globe.

Because they are so dependent on the rules that apply to them, homeless people can never really be in control of their environment. That being said, they have a particular relationship with it because of the circumstances they live in.

These aspects are fundamental to keep in mind for the rest of this thesis.

***"The homeless person is utterly and at all times at the mercy of others."***

Jeremy Waldron, 1991, p. 299

***Architecture depends, J. Till***

Among the many topics that Till tackles in this book, he writes about the normative status of architects in society. Today there is a symbolic detachment of the architectural profession by the position of power architects give themselves, far from the reality of things, when architecture is so dependent on external factors outside of the architects' hands (Till, 2009).

Nowadays, it is crucial to rethink the education and profession of architects. While the question of education is not addressed here, this thesis instead explores the scope of responsibility of the profession.

***"We look down at the city below and, at this distance, command it as an abstraction. The voices of people are lost; we just observe their functions. Buildings are reduced to form, roads to flows of traffic. Noises are measured, not listened to. Shapes are classified by type, not sensuously enjoyed. [...] And from below, the city looks back and sees us as remote figures of authority."***

Jeremy Till, 2009, p. 7

## ***A public home, A. Møller Nielsen***

*A public home* is a master's thesis at Chalmers School of Architecture written in 2016 by Andreas Møller Nielsen. It is a research on the role of design and architects in homelessness. It also explores the notion of home and establishes criteria that define it. That part was particularly relevant for my own research.

From the aspects he listed presented below, those this work focuses on are: security, ownership, recreation, and identity. Later in this thesis, the definition of home used for the research and what aspects are taken into account are presented.

### ***The notion of home***

Health

Security

Ownership

Culture

Recreation

Stability

Identity

Andreas Møller Nielsen, 2016

## ***I belong to the street, D. Uvier***

This book portrays the story of Denis Uvier, a former Belgian homeless man. He explains how he got on the streets and then found his way to a better life.

He writes about the people who offered him a helping hand just when he needed it and how he could never be where he is now without them. Thanks to them, he was in a good place to dedicate his time to his life's purpose: helping others.

I find myself amazed by people like him. No matter what obstacle life puts in their way, they always go through. Even when they have almost nothing left, they give to others. The generosity they show is dazzling.

This book is essential to break the prejudices against homeless people. It shows that they are people like you and me. They did not have the tools they needed to overcome the obstacles that life put on their path at that time. Why should it mean that they are to be considered pariahs? It simply should not.

***To street inhabitants: "Be brave and determined, be tolerant and patient. Nothing is achieved in one day. Do not give up when faced with failure. Life is a continuous battle. [...] It will never be in vain. I love you."***

Denis Uvier, 2019, p. 149

All these references bring to the table aspects to be used in the design proposal: the status of homeless people in the public space, or more generally, in society, the role and position of architects when it comes to social issues, what home means, and the experience and needs of homeless people.

# The voice of homeless people

While in Belgium, I went to the facilities of *Comme chez Nous* (CCN) to meet homeless people. CCN is a non-profit organisation founded in 1995 to help vulnerable people. It is divided in four main services each tackling specific needs (see p. 41 for a more precise description).

I sat together with three homeless people and talked with them for more than three hours. During our discussion, I could tell how much they wanted to be heard and express themselves because they have things to say and participate in. They have ideas to bring forward, and they were very grateful for someone to listen to them. This conversation helped me understand the situation a bit better and reflect on the actual needs of the homeless population. I met with W., L., and K., each with a different story to tell. To keep their identity confidential, only their name's initial will be used when mentioning them.

W. is 55. He has been on the streets since 2017. He has travelled to South America and has been back in Belgium since 2019. He dreams of going from school to school to raise awareness among children of what living on the streets means. He lives to help other people. His motto is "Work with your heart, not your head."

L. has lived on the streets in fits and starts since 2015, travelling from foster homes to apartments or girlfriends' places and back on the streets. He currently has a studio but does not feel at home there. Originally from the countryside, he is not made for the city. He was "forced" into the apartment after leaving a foster home. He finds it too small and is embarrassed by his mess when having people over.

K. was trained as a nurse. Even if she is homeless, she is always helping others. She dreams of



creating a safe space for women and their children so they can benefit from the support they need. She regrets that among all the services present in the city, so few focus on the specific needs of women and youth.

I take with me from these discussions mainly the questions of imposition and transition. When a person has been on the streets for a while, they have ways of living different from what is expected of them when integrated into society. A person on the streets has a specific form of freedom. They do not answer to anyone, do not need to follow a schedule, and no one will reprimand them for being late. Therefore, those who obtain an apartment with the help of an organisation can have a strong reaction to this change. Suddenly, they have to pay rent, owe something to someone else, and might not feel as free as they were when living outside. They might have a hard time adapting to the responsibilities that fall on them, but that is not the only part that needs adjusting. When they are on the streets, they are surrounded by a diversity of people, colours, smells, sounds, and textures. All their senses are triggered. When they find themselves in social housing, they are stuck between four white walls, in a quiet room, alone. Some of them can simply not deal with this feeling of isolation and rush back to the public space to escape from their house.

The conclusion is that imposing anything on a person from the streets will never be a good idea and that the need for transition is crucial. You can not expect someone to adapt to a sudden change in a flash, particularly when they have been used to something singularly different.

The quotes to the right are taken from our conversation. I find them very inspiring for the rest of this work.

YOU CANNOT  
IMPOSE  
ANYTHING ON  
SOMEONE  
WHO'S LIVED ON  
THE STREETS,  
THAT WILL  
NEVER WORK.

WE SHOULDN'T  
SEE THE STREET  
ONLY AS A  
NEGATIVE THING.  
LIVING ON  
THE STREETS  
MAKES YOU  
STRONG AND  
RESOURCEFUL.

SOMETIMES WE  
HEAR "YOU'RE  
TOO CLEAN TO BE  
HOMELESS".

WE NEED TO  
GIVE IT TIME.

# Homeless vs Houseless



There is an ongoing discussion on the usage of the word houseless instead of homeless. This is because the term houseless feels more accurate to describe people who lack a house but do not lack a home.

Here it is the term homeless that interests us, the part of the population that might or might not have a roof over their head and certainly does not have a place to call home.

## **But what exactly is home?**

*"Home. Home is beyond a singular location. Home is their community. Home is a social connection. Home is memories. It's a car. It's the streets. It's friends and family. Home is so much more than a physical space. By calling individuals experiencing houselessness "homeless" you may be stripping away that connection."*

Kimberly Hunt, 2019

Home is hard to define because its definition is very subjective. For some people, it is a house; for others, it might be a community or any place they are attached to. The possibilities are endless. There is thus a need to state the definition that will be used for this research:

Home is somewhere, something, or someone that makes one feel like they belong and are safe. Anything that makes them feel comfortable, gives them a feeling of privacy and a certain form of ownership and control over their environment.

*"Houselessness is simply lacking a place to live."*

Kimberly Hunt, 2019





# CONTEXT ANALYSIS

This chapter presents different aspects of the local context – historical, geographical, institutional, social, and spatial. This analysis enables us to better understand the circumstances in which the thesis is developed.



BELGIUM

Brussels

Charleroi

THE NETHERLANDS

GERMANY

LUXEMBOURG

FRANCE

The city counts around 200.000 inhabitants (WalStat, 2021). Charleroi has a strong industrial heritage. There is a past of extraction and manufacturing of coal. Because of that, it used to be one of the wealthiest cities in Belgium. Unfortunately, after all the mines closed, the decay started, and the “Black land” is now one of the poorest cities in the country. There are many abandoned and derelict industrial buildings, very often occupied by squatters.

In 2008, it was elected as the “ugliest city in the world” by the Dutch newspaper De Volkskrant. This might explain why politics are focused on trying to restore an image rather than on the most urgent issues, such as homelessness.

When it comes to policies concerning homelessness, a schedule for regulating begging in the city has been created. This is the only rule in place. Even though the city takes part in social projects and economically supports local non-profit organisations, the authorities seem to maintain a certain distance from the issue.

According to Le Relais Social de Charleroi – the organisation in charge of coordinating the social actors in the city – the estimated number of homeless people is between 300 and 500 just in the urban space and around 1000 in the whole municipality. Local organisations are currently conducting a census to determine a more precise number and the profiles and origins of this part of the population (Télésambre, 2021).

There is a significant shortage of affordable housing in Charleroi and Belgium (Sophie Crapez, personal communication, February 10th, 2022). This dearth is a big issue for the organisations that work with homeless people because they cannot find them a proper place to live if nothing is available.

In the following pages, pictures showing two sides of Charleroi – the neglected past on the one hand and the highlighted heritage on the other – are presented to get a feeling of the city and its duality.



Figure 7: Map showing the geographical location of Charleroi, made by the author



*“Once, Belgium was at the forefront of the industrial revolution. Charleroi, with its thriving steel and coal industry was its powerhouse. Now Charleroi has become a dilapidated town, plagued by chronic high unemployment and an infrastructure that is falling apart. Readers of the Dutch newspaper De Volkskrant voted Charleroi unanimously as the ugliest town in Europe, maybe even the world. Some see Charleroi as a symbol of everything that went wrong in Belgium. Others see it as a shrine and museum of industrial architecture, from a glorious era gone by. The once coal black hills of mine refuse, the so called terrils, are now lush green mountains. Still, change is coming. With the demise of industry, water and air have become clean. The first artist colonies are settling in Charleroi. Charleroi has unfulfilled promises...”*



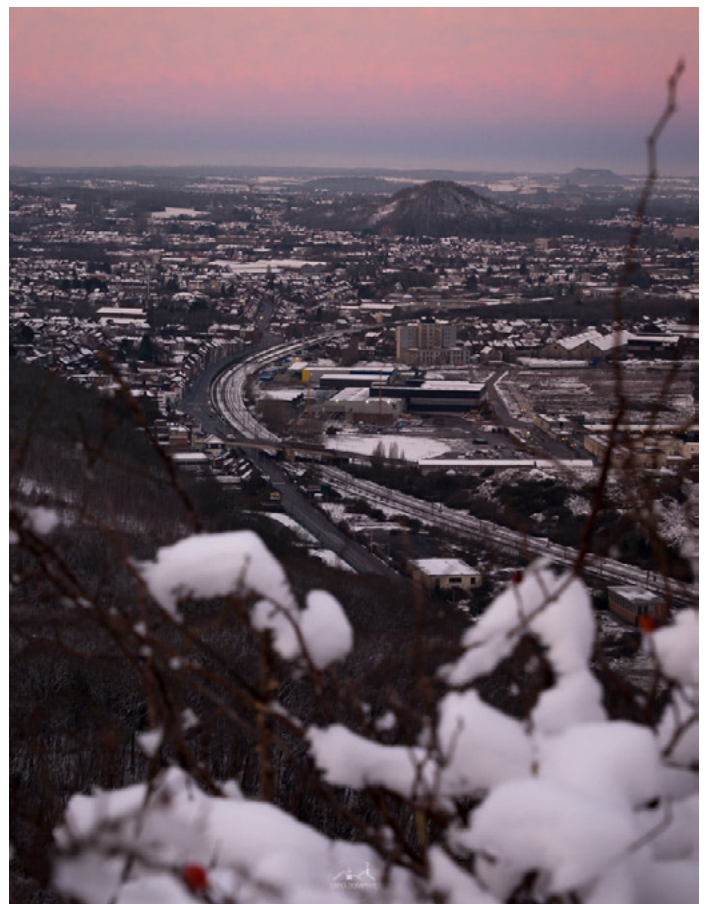
Teun Voeten, n.d.



Figures 8-18: © Teun Voeten, 2012-2021



Groups of artists from the region want to promote another vision of their city and show its characteristic heritage and beauty, despite the negative image conveyed by everywhere else. In a way Charleroi is at the image of its homeless population: defined by preconceived ideas. The local authorities and citizens work to restore its image and break these prejudices. Charleroi is a city in transition.



Figures 19-26: © Carolographie, 2021

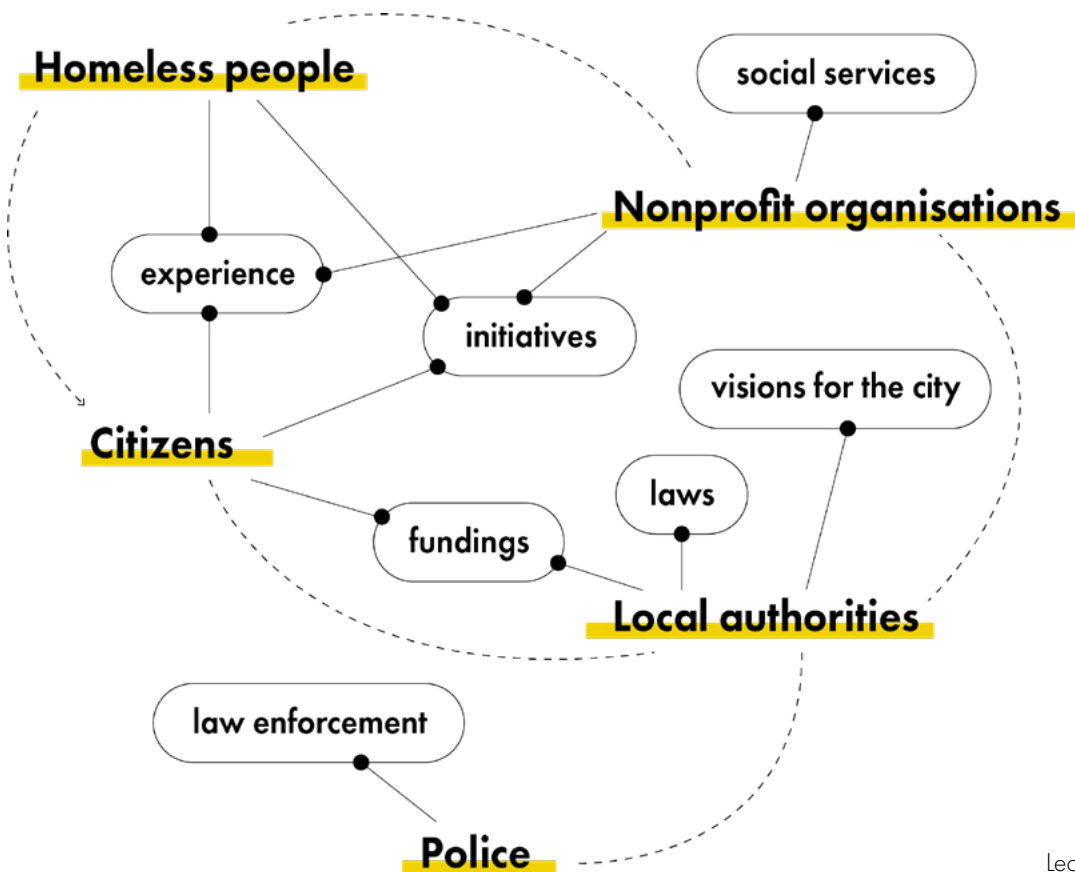
# Stakeholders

For the sake of the research, I went back to Belgium for a few weeks to conduct fieldwork and meet with different stakeholders.

To get as much relevant information as possible, I needed to talk to people confronted with homelessness every day. Thus I discussed with different organisations, homeless people, citizens, and a police officer. In addition, I contacted the local authorities but unfortunately never got any response. That is a shame because they certainly have an essential role to play when it comes to homelessness. Hearing their side of the story and about their projects for the city would have been very valuable.

Each stakeholder has a different role in the research because they bring different visions and perspectives on the issue. Each of them has something to bring to the discussion as they all have different experiences with homelessness. They are all directly or indirectly connected because they depend, rely on, or have a duty towards each other, one way or another.

Seeing the purpose of the thesis, the points of view that are mostly taken into account are the ones from the homeless people and local organisations. They are at the forefront of the situation, and it only seemed right to base the proposal mainly on their experience.



Legend:

----- (Co)dependency

**Text** Stakeholders

**Text** Contribution to the discussion

Figure 27: Diagram of local stakeholders and the role they have in this research, made by the author

# Homelessness in Charleroi

The causes of homelessness are complex to define because each story is unique. There are many different causes (breakups, drug addiction, mental health issues, job loss, and so on), but the common ground for almost all individuals is the loss of social bonds with reliable and trustworthy people (Sophie Crapez, personal communication, February 10th, 2022). This common characteristic shows the importance of social relationships in humans' lives. This is one of the first things people look for when they come to reception centres or shelters. Socialising keeps them going every day and gives them at least one reason to get up in the morning.

As for social services, many of them already exist throughout the city. They are specialised in all sorts of needs (parental responsibilities, drug addiction, food and clothing, or mental health). However, there is a lack of structures adapted to the needs of youth or single women (K., personal communication, February 25th, 2022). I have been in contact with one organisation in particular: *Comme chez Nous*, which, if we try translating it to English, means *Like Home*. The organisation is divided into four main services for the different profiles, needs, or stages of homelessness; *Le Rebond* is the reception centre, it is the first service homeless people reach out to; *Chez Toit* provides assistance for finding housing; *Toudi Boudji* focuses on organising activities for inclusion, participation, and autonomy development. Finally, *Parent'elle* is a service dedicated to women and parents' needs (Huygens, Pêtre, D'Amato, 2017).

Another way to understand the context of homelessness is to look at numbers. During the year 2021, the reception centre *Le Rebond* welcomed 1054 different homeless individuals at least once, for a total of 14.361 in 365 days, which makes an average of 39 people/day. The statistics are divided into a series of categories to get an overview of the situation. The diagram to the right shows numbers in the following categories: gender, origins, family situation, and housing situation.

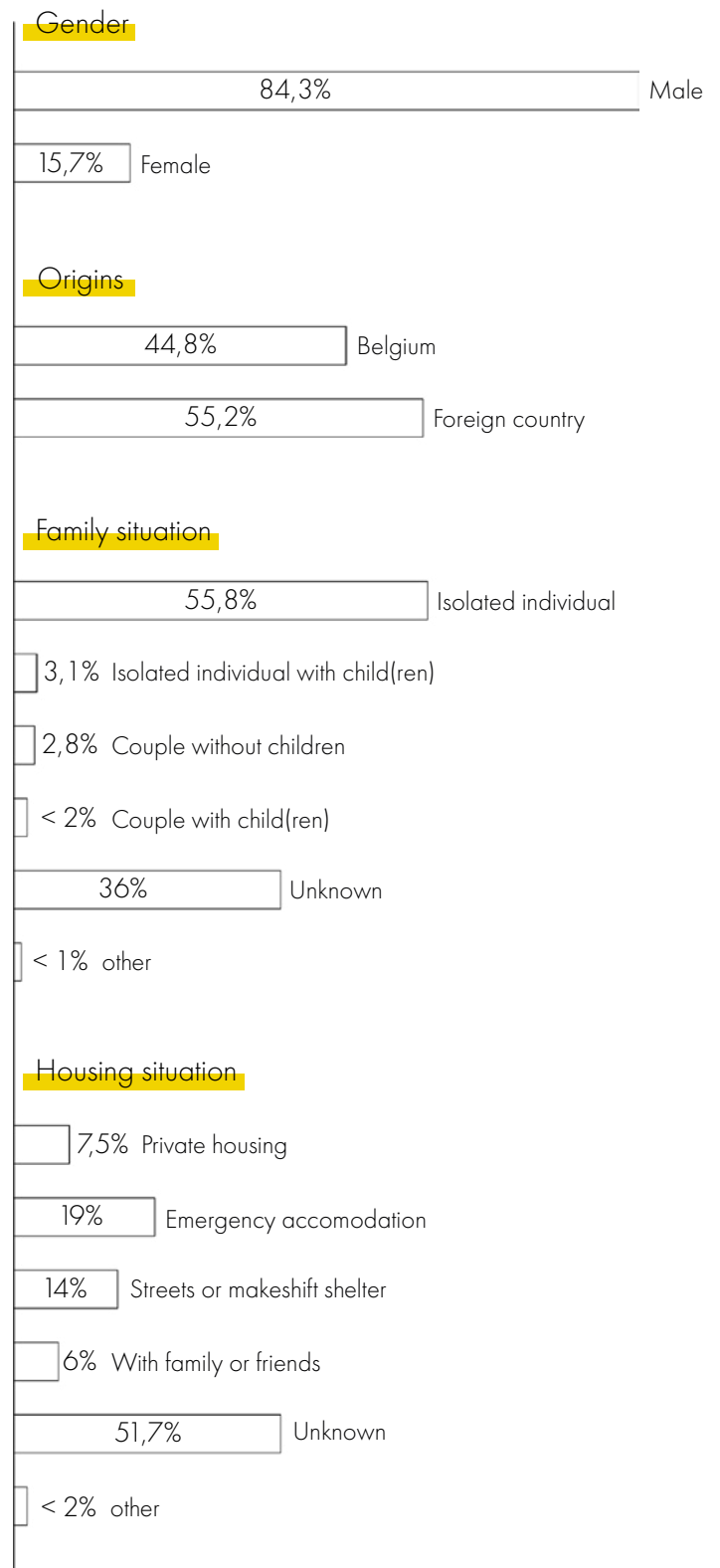
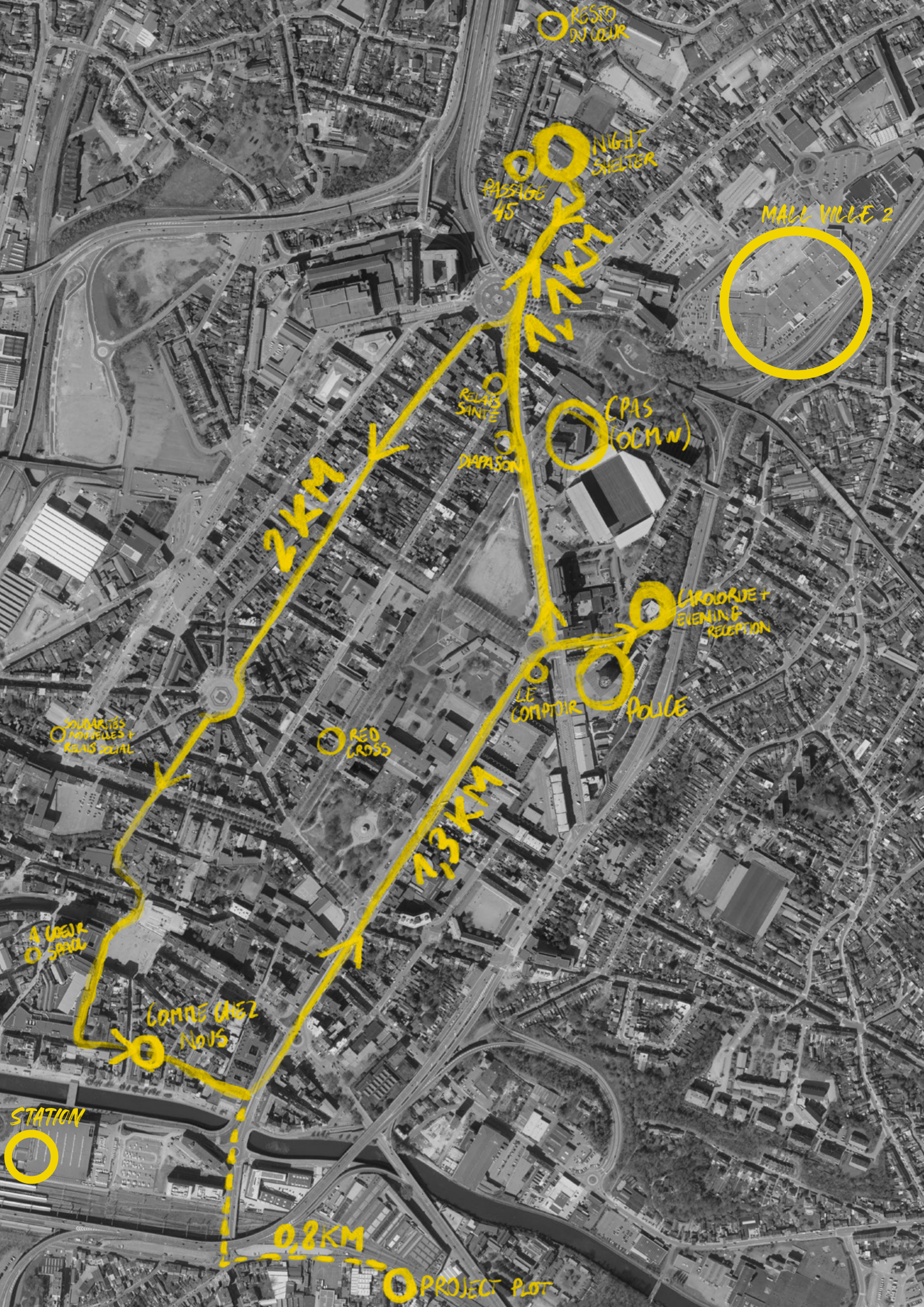


Figure 28: Statistics of homeless individuals who visited the reception centre *Le Rebond*, adapted from *Comme chez Nous*, 2021



RESTO OUTDOOR

NIGHT EXHIBIT

PASSAGE 45

MALL VILLE 2

RELAIS SINTÉ  
DIAPASON

(PAS (ODM.N))

PROJET + EVENING RECEPTION

LE COMPTIR

POUCE

RED CROSS

MUSEUMS, MUSEUMS + ROUND THEAT

A LOUVE SPAC

GOMAS CHEZ NOUS

STATION

0.2KM

PROJECT PLOT

2KM

1.3KM

## Non-profit organisation:

Comme chez Nous

## Shelters:

Night shelter Dourlet

Evening Reception

## Shelter for families and women:

Le Triangle

## Street Educators:

Carolorue

Solidarités Nouvelles

## Bigger organisations:

Relais Social

Red Cross

CPAS (OCMW)

## To get food and clothes:

Passage 45

Resto du Coeur

## To get clothes, accessories and other items:

A Coeur Space

## Health care:

Diapason

Relais Santé

Le Comptoir

From the discussion I had with homeless people, and complementary information from the police, I was able to map a series of social services available in the city and the route that some homeless people take almost every day.

As the map to the left shows, many services are available in the same area, framed by the main train station in the south and the mall Ville 2 in the north.

On a typical day, homeless people – those who use the available services – leave the night shelter in the morning and walk approximately two kilometres until they reach *Comme Chez Nous* and its day reception centre. There, they can get free coffee and snacks and talk with fellow street inhabitants, social workers, and volunteers until it closes at 3.30 pm. Then they head to the evening reception where they can get a hot meal and stay until 8.30 pm. Finally, it is time to go back to the night shelter, get as much sleep as possible, and start again the next day.

Needless to say that not all homeless people follow that way every day. It is quite common that some refuse the help of social services because they do not trust them. They feel abandoned by the system. Those are harder to reach, and that is when street educators go into action (see appendix I).

In the following pages, a speculative homeless person from Charleroi will immerse you in the environments they interact with when they take the route highlighted in yellow with a series of pictures and sounds. The rest of the collection of pictures is available in appendix II.



Figure 29: Mapping of services for homeless people in Charleroi and daily route. Aerial photo from WalOnMap, 2021

# Route

A speculative homeless person's daily journey:



1  
*My day starts at 8.00 am when I leave the night shelter. I was lucky enough to get a spot last night when so many others had to find shelter somewhere else. You can never know where you're going to sleep at night or if you'll be able to sleep at all.*



2  
*I reach the Marsupilami roundabout. At this time of day, it's very busy with the cars of people going to work or driving their children to school. It takes a while to reach the other side with all this traffic. Drivers are in such a hurry that they rarely let pedestrians cross.*



Scan to listen



5  
*On Charles II Square, there is a local café. I sometimes like to sit there and enjoy a cup of coffee when money enables it. I like hearing people's conversations while I rest my legs for a bit.*



6  
*During my journey, I get to observe the beautiful architecture present in the city. Charleroi, despite its reputation, also has richness, and it is worth appreciating once in a while.*



I now arrive at what we call the Monument Square. This place is well-known by drug dealers and addicts, and by the police. There used to be a lot of traffic there, but now sellers and consumers have to be more discreet. But still, some of them are already gathering.



I pass through Regency Street. It is under construction, like so many other places in the city. Charleroi is continuously under construction. It's been like that for decades now; you eventually get used to the noise and inconvenience.



I always get nostalgic when I walk through Mountain Street. It was still filled with life not even ten years ago. Since, nearly all the shops closed, it became a ghost street. Now beggars sit there hoping that some generous passer-by will give them a few coins.



At the low part of the street, the liveliness starts to be sensed. The few restaurants and shops create a transition towards Green Square and the relatively recent mall, Rive Gauche.

9



*On the square, there are always many people: shoppers, workers, teenagers, and sadly, beggars too. I often see some of my friends in front of the mall's doors asking for money to every person they see. No one likes asking for charity, but sometimes there's just no other choice.*



Scan to listen

10



*I reach the alley behind the mall. It feels nice to have a bit of quiet after these few seconds in the agitation of the square.*

13



*I pass in front of a tram stop. It gets pretty noisy at this time of day. Students have left school and are heading back home.*



Scan to listen

14



*I am again enjoying the diversity of buildings that I come across on this route.*

11



*I finally reach Comme chez Nous. Some of my fellow street-mates are already there. I'm looking forward to sitting, getting coffee and a few snacks, and talking and laughing with the people there. Those few hours here always brighten my day.*

12



*At 15.00 it's time to leave and head for the evening reception centre, which opens at 16.00.*

15



*I like walking along the Queen Astrid Park; it's nice to see a bit of nature on my route and to hear the sound of children playing. I catch sight of another homeless man taking a nap on a bench nearby. He was lucky to find one without armrests where he could lie down.*

16



*From here, I can now see the police tower. The city asked a renowned architect to design it, and they spent a fortune on it. I assume it was an emergency to rehouse the police services.*



*On my way, I walk past Le Comptoir, a health centre that works for drug addicts and provides them with support, information and services for risk reduction, and health care.*



*I arrive at the evening reception centre. Again, regulars are already queuing outside. Here I will get a hot meal before going back to the night shelter. This centre hosts different services, including Carolorue, the street educators' service.*



*Again another health centre for those who don't have access to the usual health care system.*



*I arrive at the Marsupilami roundabout again. This time it's a bit quieter, with only a few cars and delivery moped; most people are at home now.*

19



*After a filling meal and good conversations, I head toward my final destination for the day, it's 20.00, and I have to hurry if I want to be sure to get a bed for the night.*

20



*It is pretty quiet here today, but when there's a football game at the stadium nearby, I can assure you that you can hear supporters singing and cars honking.*

23



*I'm finally back at the night shelter, where people are already queuing again. Only thirty beds are available, so you better come long enough before the opening at 21.00. Spots for women are limited. If men already took all of them, they have to go to the women and families shelter, four kilometres away. I'm sure to have a bed for tonight, but who knows what tomorrow holds for me?*



Scan to listen



# PROPOSAL

This chapter presents the spatial response to the previous chapters. The final outcome is showcased and explained through graphical documents such as diagrams, plans and sections, and collages.

# Site

The proposal is taking place on the plot presented below. The reason behind the choice of this land is that it has been bought by *Comme chez Nous* (see p. 41 for a description of the organisation) to relocate their services. Because of the pandemic and other various reasons, the project has not taken place yet but the organisation still plans to establish itself there. It seems interesting to develop the proposal on this plot knowing that it will someday be used by homeless people.

The site is located at a block's angle, stuck between two streets, railway lines, and existing constructions. Its surface is approximately 350m<sup>2</sup>. On average, there is a train passing every five minutes. Since the station is very close, the trains are not going fast, but the noise pollution is still undeniable. The same goes for a fast road located nearby, causing constant background noise due to the traffic. The streets circling the plot are mainly used for local traffic; therefore, the frequency of cars passing is relatively low.



Scan to listen

The site is quite segregated from the rest of the network previously presented on the map because it is on the other side of the river. There thus needs to be something really worth for homeless people to travel an extra 800 metres to reach it.

Implementing social services in this location raises questions on how society and local authorities perceive homeless people, sending them on a plot that seems, at first glance, marginalised and left out. But looking at the site a bit more closely, qualities are found.

The design proposal explores how to turn the marginalised situation around. It aims at taking advantage of the qualities of the site – its inclusion in a residential neighbourhood and its closeness to the train station and to the city centre – and transforming the disadvantages – mainly noise pollution and degraded elements – into opportunities.

In the next pages, we will again follow a speculative homeless person to grasp their experience of walking the streets of Charleroi, this time on their way to the proposal site.





*I am now at the end of the street where Comme chez Nous is located, heading south. The arches on the right might sometimes shelter homeless people from the rain, and the proximity to the tram stop makes it a strategic spot for begging.*



*After walking for a bit, I reach the river and the bridge I have to cross. The bridge is mostly car centred, so it's not very pleasant for pedestrians to walk there.*



*From here, I can see the Ring – a high-speed way that goes all around the city – going over the road. There is often a lot of traffic there and, therefore, a lot of noise.*

*Under the Ring, I can see that homeless people decided to settle along the railway. It is obviously very dangerous, but at least when people are there, they feel a bit hidden from the rest of the world.*



*I am now getting closer to the site. The railways are hidden behind the concrete fence to the left. The buildings to the right have commercial or industrial purposes but do not seem to be very patronised.*



*Finally, I reach the plot. The neighbourhood is seems relatively calm, but the trains passing every five minutes come and disturb the stillness.*





*"This project within your neighbourhood wanted to boost a participative and civic dynamic to revalue these living spaces. With the help of the King Baudoin foundation, the QCM, the city of Charleroi, numerous partners and YOU, citizens, colours could be applied on these walls. Green spaces created for more togetherness. These places were invested by and for you. We let you the task to pursue what has been initiated..."*

Quote from the wall in the photo



Figures 31-33: Photos of the site taken during the field trip, made by the author

# Concepts

The aim of this proposal is not to have a defined design but rather a spatial translation of the conclusions from the research and fieldwork. Homelessness has many various forms (see p. 41) and thus various needs. For instance, not all street inhabitants perceive their living conditions as bad. Some appreciate the freedom that being out of the system gives them. In those cases, no one should try and force them to live differently but rather provide them with a place they can go to when they have specific needs and where they can be in charge of their actions. Others might desperately need help to move on with their life because they cannot do it alone. Then they need people to give them time to transition from the conditions they live in to their ideal situation. As for the people who do not lack a place to live but still feel homeless, they require a place that gives

them a sense of belonging and safety, a place where they can build and sustain social relationships.

The proposal is a place that could be qualified as a community centre with the following aspects in focus: Empowerment of the local homeless population as defined earlier, Transition for those who need a bit more time to adapt to new conditions, Social bonding and Sharing between people from similar – or completely different – backgrounds, and finally Relaxing and Exploring. The project consists of a garden and four buildings articulated in a public space. The way they are placed on the plot defines spaces that could be compared to some typologies found in the public environment, such as streets, squares, alleys, and parks. This is done to bring elements of the urban environment

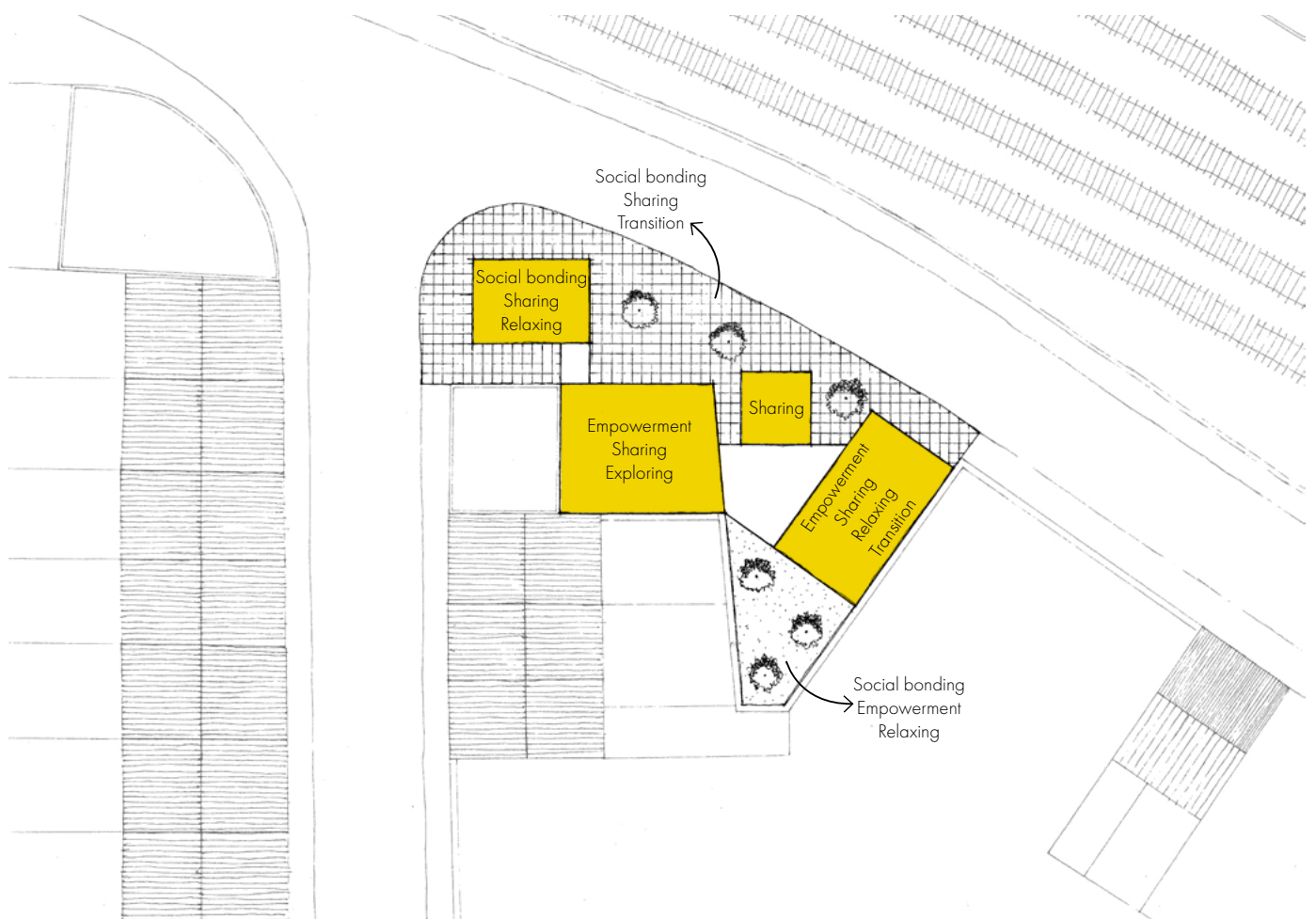
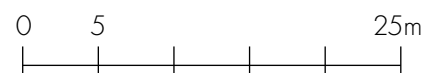


Figure 34: Centres of attention of the different space of the proposal, made by the author



– which is the one homeless people interact with daily, as shown previously with the route pictures– onto the plot. With that in mind, the project has also been designed with specific attention to sound. It offers spaces that are more or less open for noise to penetrate (fig. 35). Hearing is a very much triggered sense when spending most of the time in the urban environment. From my discussion with homeless people, I have learned that it can be challenging for some of them to cope with sudden quietness simply because they are not used to it. When one is most of the times out in the open, surrounded by people and noise, it can be hard to find themselves stuck between four walls, alone and in silence. Hence the necessity to create space for transition for people to find their comfort zone slowly.

the design makes it possible to travel easily from one building to the other, with or without going through the public space (fig.37).

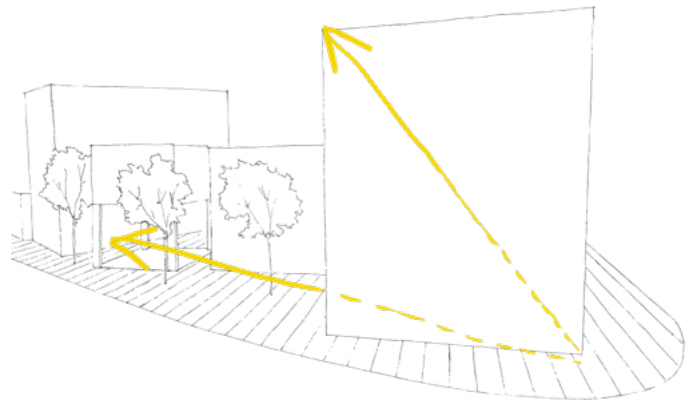


Figure 36: Diagram of rising level of privacy, made by the author

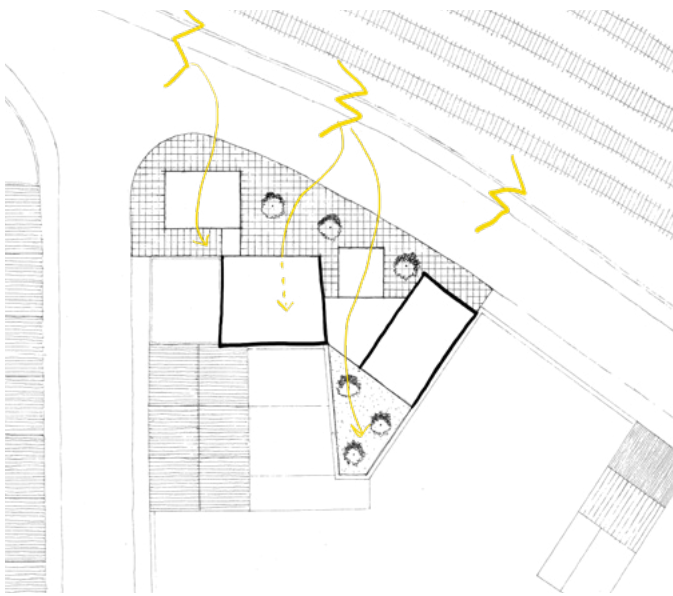


Figure 35: Diagram of relation to sound, made by the author

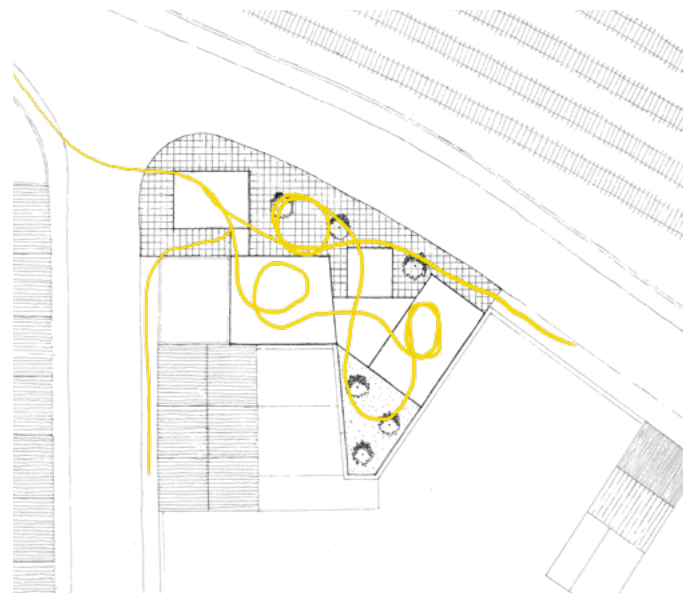


Figure 37: Diagram of the possible flows, made by the author

This leads to another important aspect of the proposal: the transition from public to private. The higher one gets in the buildings, the more private it becomes (fig. 36). The same goes for when going from west to east. This allows the users to pick the type of environment they feel most comfortable in at that time. To facilitate that,

On the following pages, floor plans, a section going through the four buildings, and a series of collages showcase the different spaces and examples of what they could be used for.

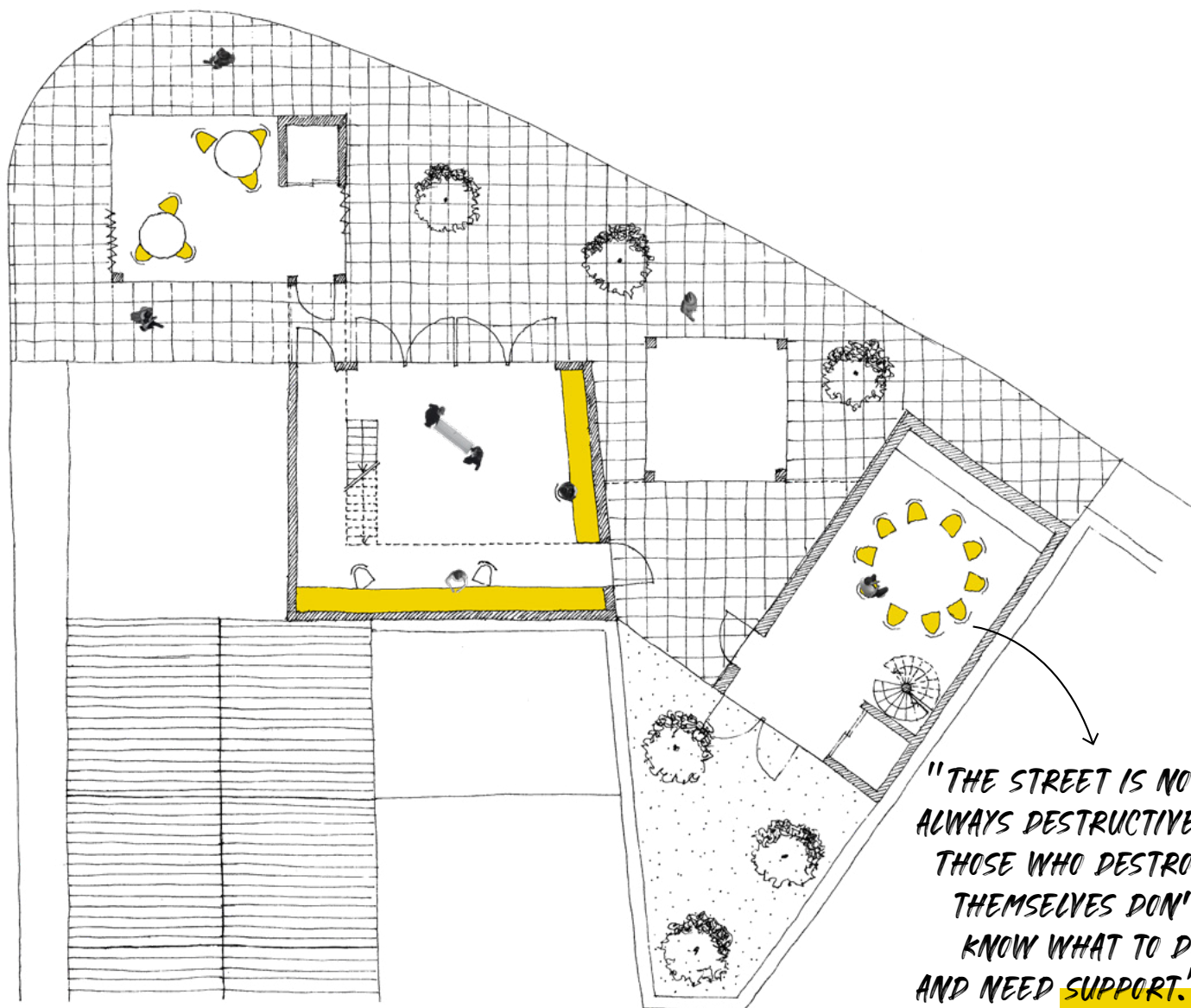
# Proposal description

On the ground floor can be found a welcoming space which is located at the angle to be a landmark for people using the facilities.

A workshop is available for DIY, arts and crafts, and building projects together. It is a place where ideas are explored and realised. This space opens up to the outside to extend the working surface.

An outdoor covered space can be used as a pavilion where people can dance, play music, or hang out together.

Finally, a space for group therapy or other support groups is available in the most eastern building. W. emphasised during our discussion the necessity for spaces to share your homeless experience with others.



*"THE STREET IS NOT ALWAYS DESTRUCTIVE. THOSE WHO DESTROY THEMSELVES DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO AND NEED SUPPORT."*

Ground floor



Above the welcoming space is a computer room for all those who do not have access to one or the Internet.

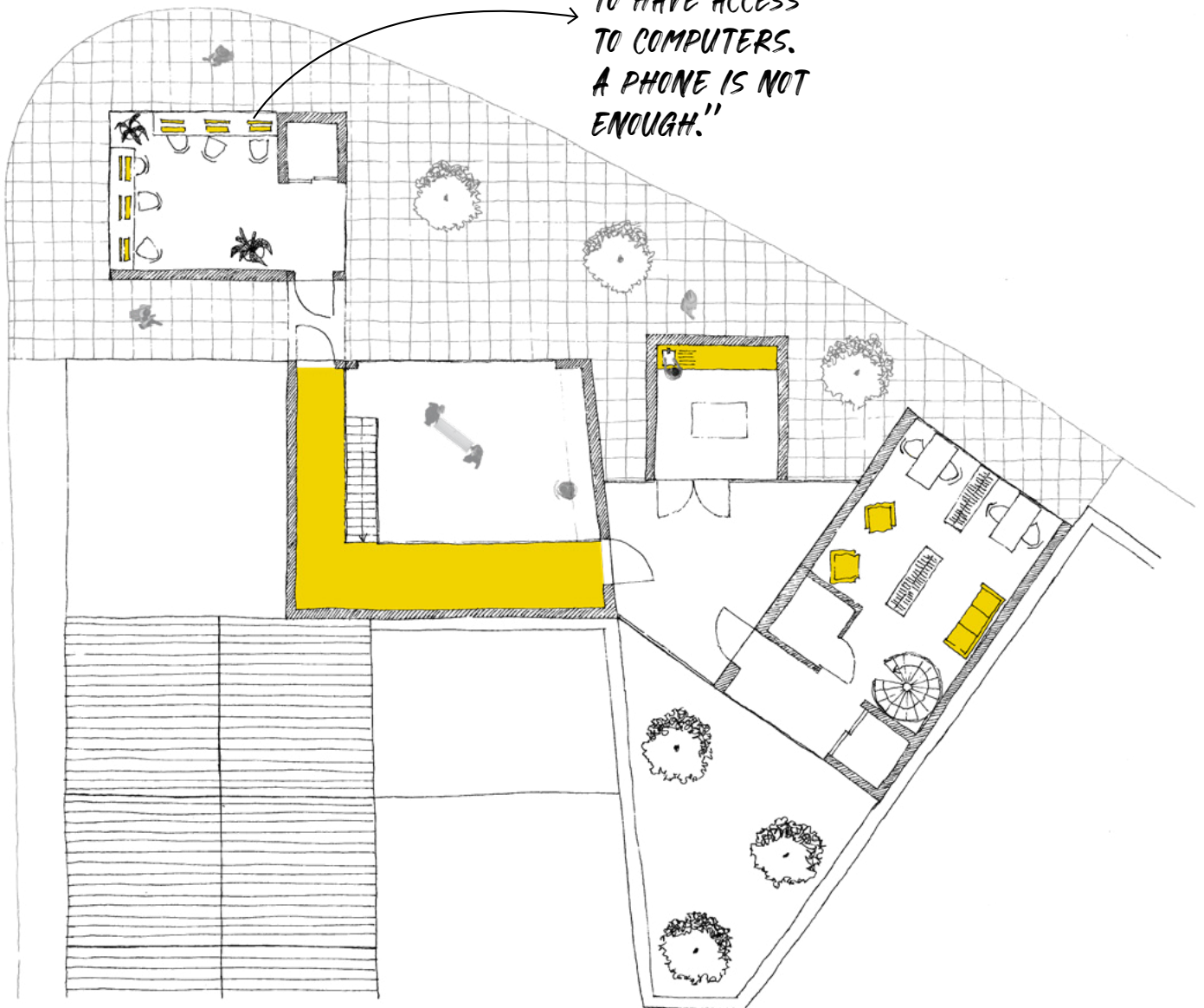
The mezzanine in the workshop building is mainly meant for travelling from one building to the other, but the walls that go along it are available for painting graffiti for instance.

A small kitchen is placed on top of the pavilion. It is

connected to the nearby buildings by a terrace where people can sit and enjoy a meal or a cup of coffee.

A quiet space/reading room is located above the group therapy space for those who enjoy reading while sitting comfortably or simply those who need a bit of peace and quiet.

*"THAT'D BE NICE TO HAVE ACCESS TO COMPUTERS. A PHONE IS NOT ENOUGH."*



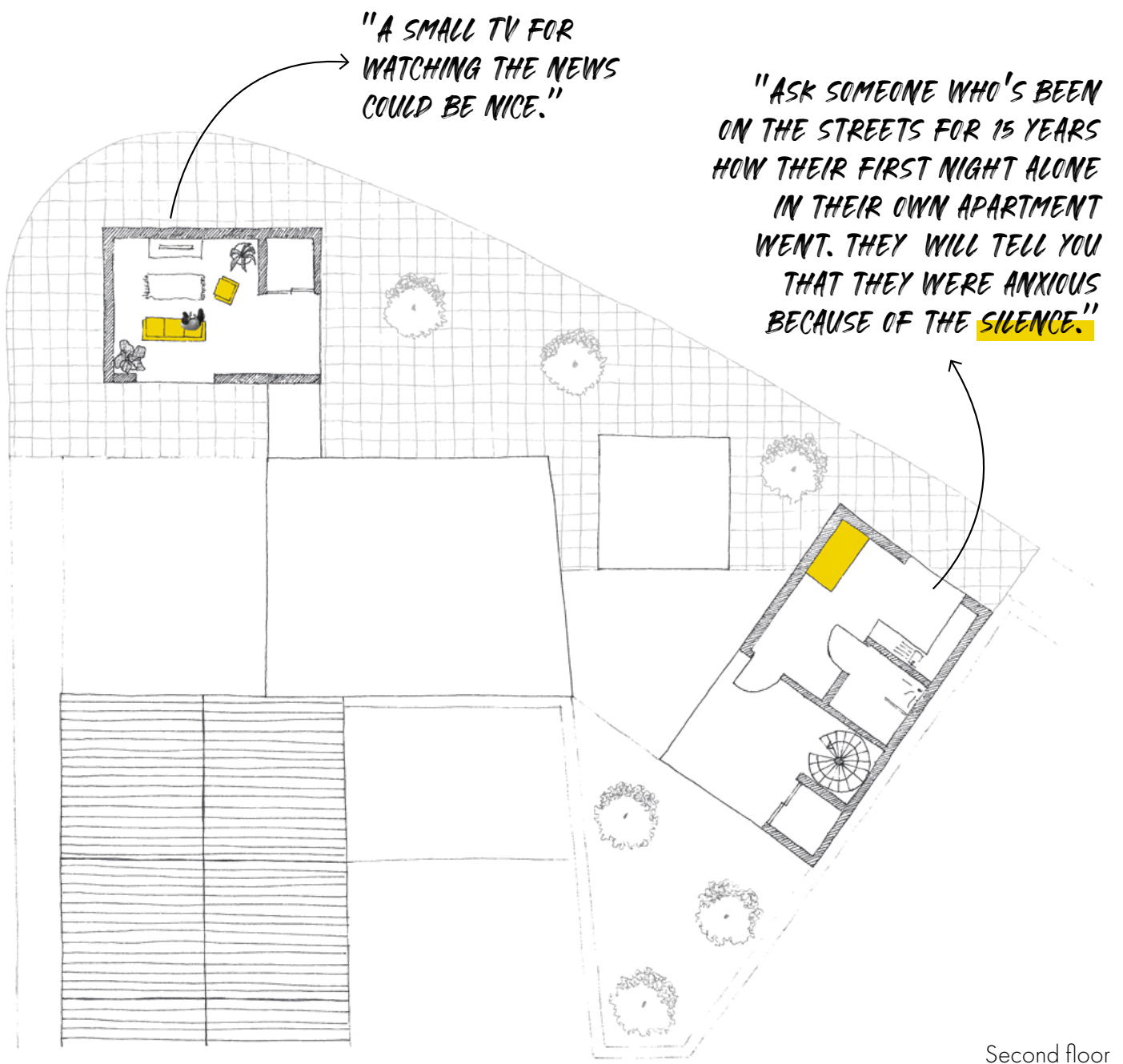
First floor



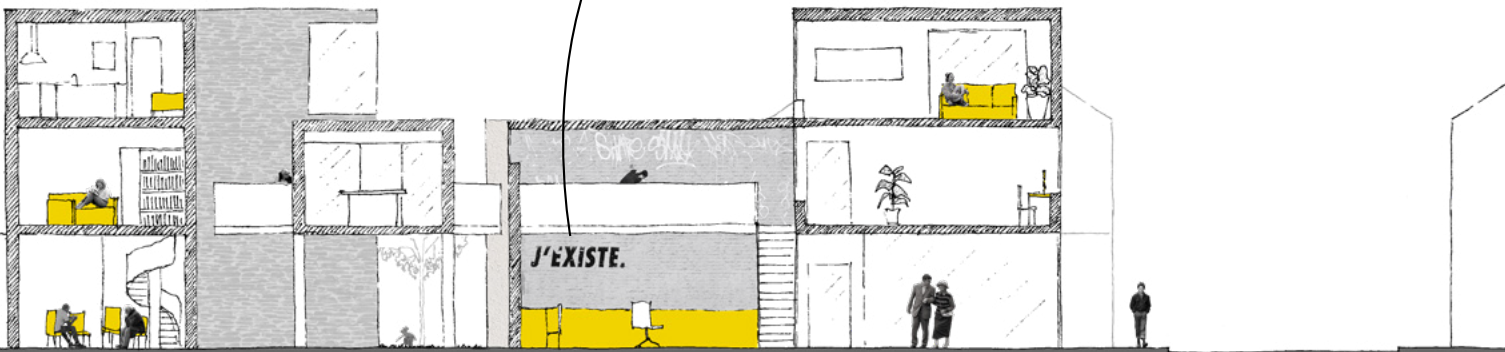
Finally, the top floor includes a living room where people can sit and watch the news or a movie.

In addition, there is a small studio bookable for those who want to experience living on their own for a few days or simply for those who want to take a shower and

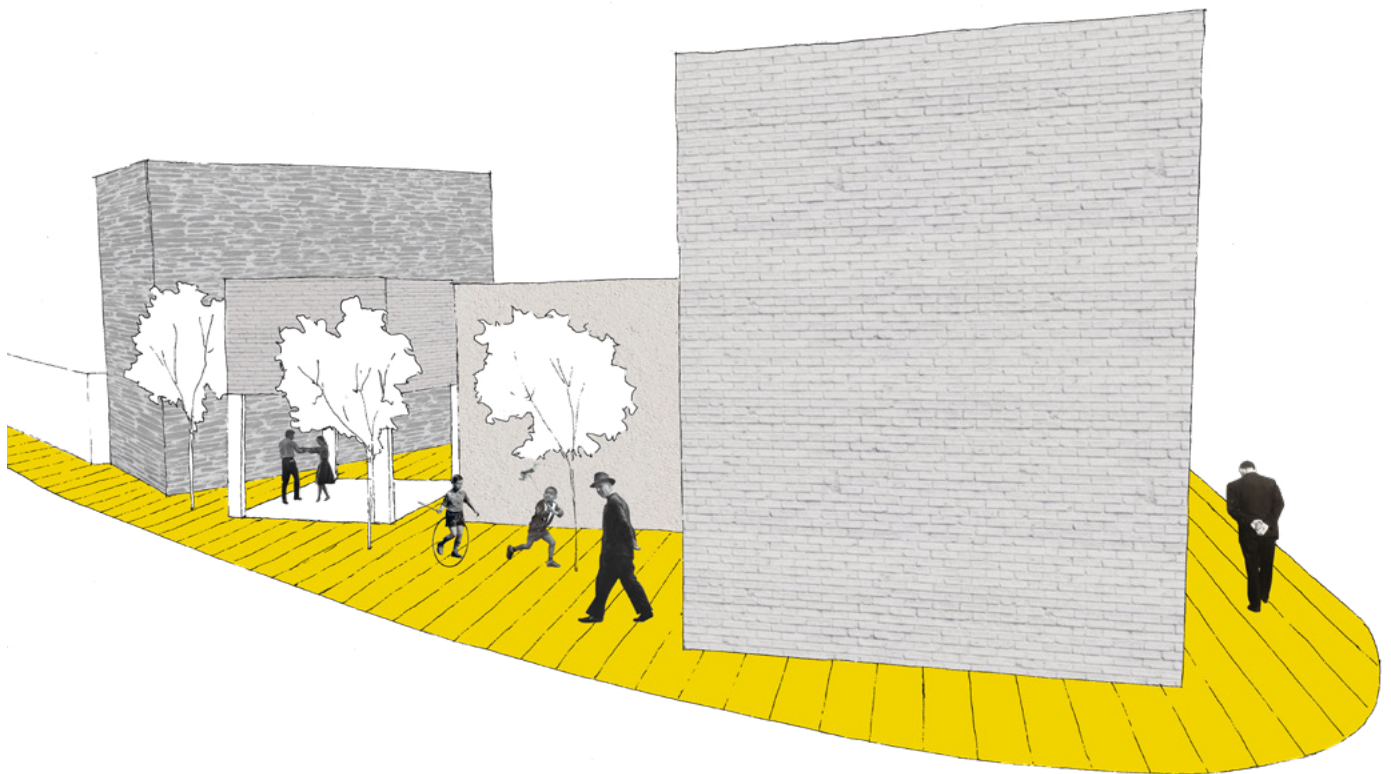
rest in the middle of the day. This is done for the question of transition needed for some people to prepare themselves to the situation they will most probably be in if reaching out to services and finding permanent housing.



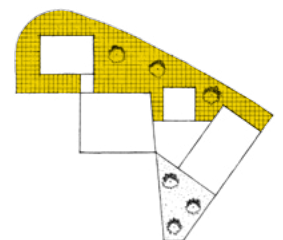
Including existing elements of the site to keep a connection with the context.

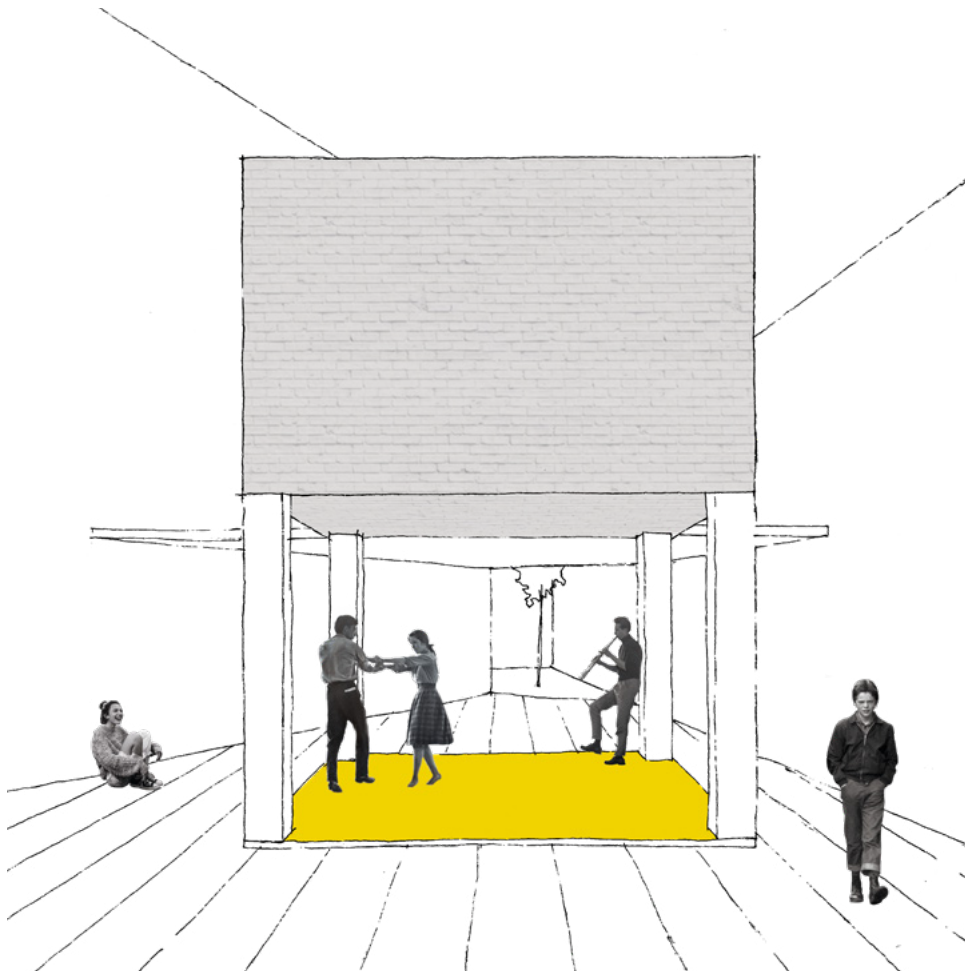


Longitudinal section



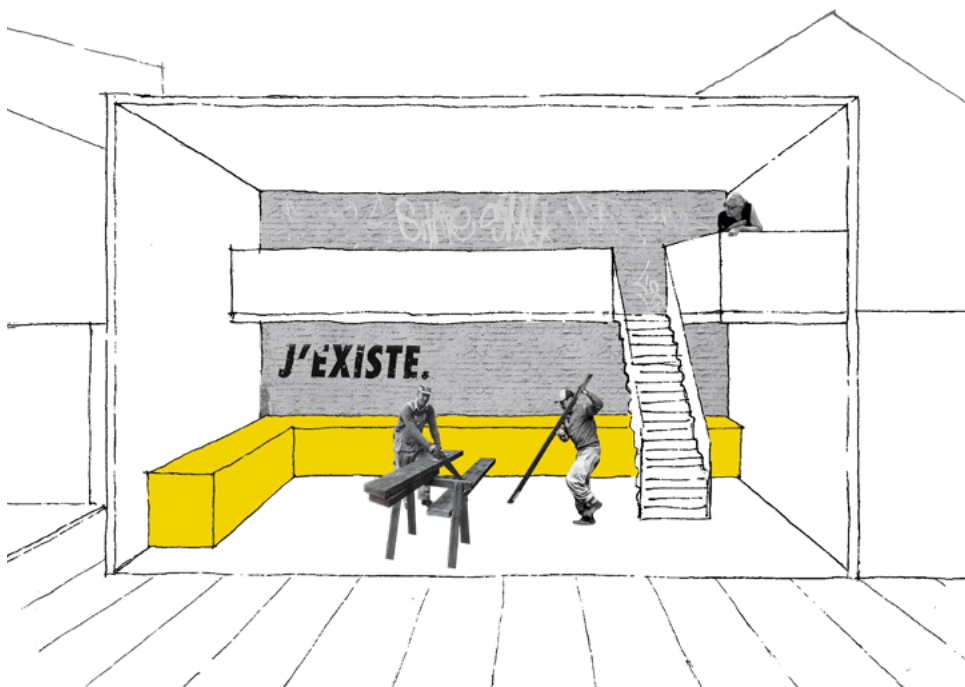
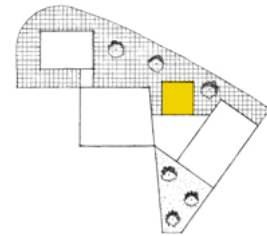
This view shows the proposal from the outside, giving a feeling of the different ways to interact with the public space. Its also shows that different textures are used, relating to the ones that can be found in different place in the city. It also shows the importance of sometimes opening up to non-homeless people to share experience and raise awareness, including among children.





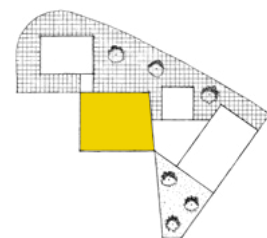
**WE NEED TO LAUGH. THAT'S VERY IMPORTANT TO US, LAUGHING.**

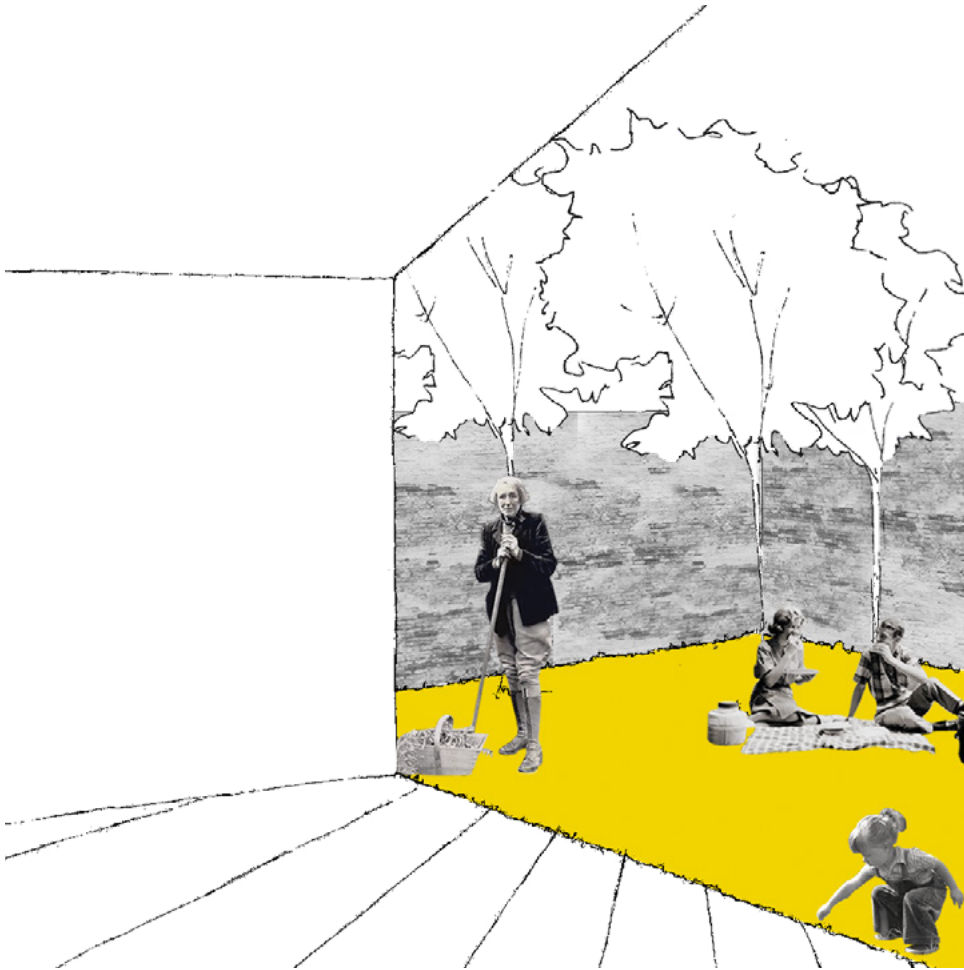
An outdoor covered space for dancing, playing music, having public readings or simply sitting and hanging out with friends. A place to have fun.



**WE SHOULDN'T SEE THE STREET ONLY AS A NEGATIVE THING. LIVING ON THE STREETS MAKES YOU STRONG AND RESOURCEFUL.**

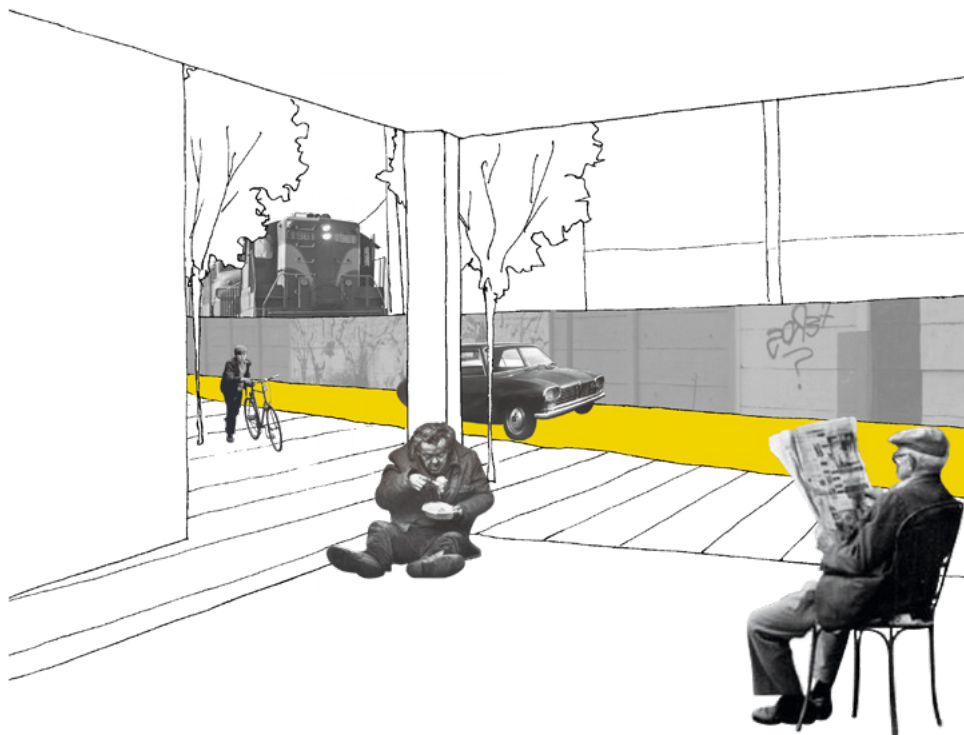
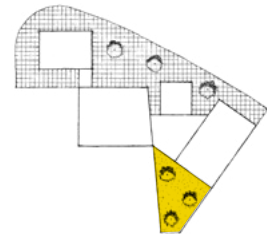
A place dedicated to the exploration and realisation of ideas, and to building projects together.





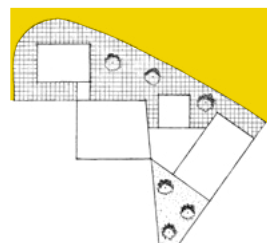
**SOMETIMES WE HEAR "YOU'RE TOO CLEAN TO BE HOMELESS".**

A small garden to grow plants, read a book, have a picnic or simply rest under a tree. A place to take a breath and take your time.



**YOU CANNOT IMPOSE ANYTHING ON SOMEONE WHO'S LIVED ON THE STREETS, THAT WILL NEVER WORK.**

A view from the plot towards the street showing the relation to urban noises and how people are free to interact with the space as they want.





# REFLECTIONS

When I chose the topic of homelessness for this master's thesis, I knew that it would not be an easy topic but that it would be a very interesting one. I was far from anticipating how inspiring and mind-opening this journey would be for me. It is now time to conclude this work with reflections on the research questions, the purpose, the process, the final outcome, and the activist approach in each of these four parts.

## 1. The research questions

### *What can architects do in order to counteract homelessness?*

When dealing with homelessness, I think architects should combine an activist approach with the usual methods they use. What does that mean? Being an architect activist means broadening their scope of action and not only limiting themselves to designing, especially because designing – their usual intervention – might not be the most impactful phase of their involvement. What is essential is to genuinely understand what homelessness means, not only generally but also in the specific context. Non-exhaustive ways of learning and understanding the situation are reading about the topic, conducting fieldwork, contacting and collaborating with local actors and stakeholders, and analysing all the data collected. Interdisciplinarity appears crucial in the fight against homelessness. Everyone who has valuable expertise or role to play should be involved. I am thinking about former and current homeless people, social workers, street educators, psychologists and psychiatrists, local political authorities, etc. Architects are trained to design; they should thus use those skills to participate in the discussion. While they can broaden their scope of action with what has been mentioned above, they should not do other people's jobs but rather cooperate with them.

### *How can an architectural design create a feeling of home for a community?*

A feeling of home comes with the feelings of safety, comfort, empowerment, and control. A sense of community comes with sharing and bonding socially. A design should then consider all these aspects to make a community feel at home. As a community is something very dependent on locality, this last point also needs to be a big part of the design.

### *What components can create space for autonomy, transition and empowerment of the homeless population?*

It appears that what makes a space suitable for developing autonomy, empowerment, and transition are the people more than the space itself. Therefore the spatial environment should foster the creation of a feeling of belonging to a community. It should make it possible for people to evolve within a group and get support from it, making it easier for them to transition toward a life in which they are utterly in charge of their actions.

## 2. The purpose of the thesis

This thesis aims at raising awareness and interest in this topic, not only for architects but also for all people who feel concerned and want to be part of change. More than trying to solve the problem, this paper is about using a research-based and non-defined design to bring something to the discussion on how to counteract homelessness.

**PEOPLE OF THE  
STREETS ARE NOT  
ALL BAD, MAYBE  
SOME OF THEM  
CAN EVEN HELP  
YOU.**

It is meant for this work to break some people's preconceived ideas about what being homeless means by sharing the experience of homeless people and other stakeholders. Activism is here used by addressing the needs of an excluded and marginalised population and allowing them to be seen and hopefully heard as well.

### 3. The process

The first couple of months were entirely dedicated to research and analysis. This means reading, searching for references, going into the field, and meeting and interviewing stakeholders. Basically, building knowledge on the topic and choosing how it would be approached. This particular decision was very difficult because many equally interesting directions I could take presented themselves to me. The choice was not easy, and I still wonder what would have happened if I had taken a different path. Would my decision have been different if I had had more time? Was the one I made the best option?

Writing a thesis is hardly restful. The process was a succession of ups and downs. It has been very stressful at times while exhilarating and enthralling at others. It was out of my comfort zone to work with the field of design activism, but I found it very stimulating, and I am glad I got to explore how this mindset impacts the work of architects.

### 4. The final outcome

The result of this thesis is the design of a community centre dedicated to the homeless population of Charleroi. The outcome is not an exact design because it requires more time, experimentation, and dialogue with the people at the forefront to reach that level of detail. Moreover, a concrete design would not be the most relevant outcome for this research. What would make the place successful are the people using it.

Therefore the design should be flexible enough for people to appropriate the space as they intend. The outcome is thus more of a graphical representation of elements from the discussions and fieldwork. It is a spatial translation of how homeless people interact with and behave in their environment.

The complex nature of homelessness and the variety of profiles involved make it extremely challenging to include and satisfy everyone. Even if we want to include everyone, there needs to be delimitations in the focus group. Not all problems can be solved in a single place. Working within a network of services and having good communication between those is crucial.

Would this project work in other places, or could it be replicated somewhere else? Probably not. One of the conclusions is that it is essential to consider the local specificities of a place and its communities to design against homelessness. What is done in Charleroi will most definitely be different from what is done in Brussels, London, New York, or Tokyo, just because the **people** involved and their culture are different.

Working on this thesis broadened my vision of the scope of architects' actions. I will take everything that I have learned during this journey with me for the next steps in my life as an architect. Finally, again a big thank you to all the people that took part in this adventure with me. I am truly grateful.



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## IMAGES

All unlisted figures are completely made by the author.

Figure 6: adapted from MASLOW A. H. (1943). *A theory of human motivation*. *Psychological review* 50, p 370-396.

Figures 8-18: VOETEN T. (2012-2020). *Charleroi Industrial Decline*.

Figures 19-26: CAROLOGRAPHIE (2021). *Pays de Charleroi, c'est toi que je préfère! (Land of Charleroi, you are the one I prefer!)*.

Figure 28: Adapted from ASBL Comme chez Nous (2021). *Le Rebond : rapport d'activité 2021 (Le Rebond: activity report 2021)*.

Figures 29&30: aerial photos from WALONMAP (2021). Retrieved 2022/03/01. URL: <https://geoportail.wallonie.be/walonmap#BBOX=154862.71747330617,156893.39861800178,122049.4135169553,122827.29007270842>



# APPENDIX

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# Appendix I: Roaming in Charleroi

A few hours of roaming in Charleroi from squat to squat are already enough to get a sense of the disastrous conditions some homeless people and drug users live in.

C. B. is a street educator at Carolorue. He took me to some of the most «renowned» places for drug-using and squatting. As it was in the morning, we had not encountered many people. Those who sleep on the streets are still asleep, hidden somewhere. Only those who spent the night in a shelter have already started the day.

Squats are abandoned or remote places where unhoused people can find their way into, for instance, through a broken door or window. There are different types of squats. Usually, those used for drug consumption are not the same as those occupied for sleeping. Also important to mention is that squatters are not all people with drug addiction. They are people that do not have anywhere else to be and found that to be the safest, most comfortable situation if the word comfortable can be used here.

Street educators have a preventive role. They build a trust-based relationship with the people on the streets by offering them coffee, biscuits, or sterile needles and talking with them about everything and anything. They simply give them their time. They let them know about all the existing services to help them, but it stops there. Those who agree to get help are sent to the proper services, and those who refuse are free to do so. The educators will try another time.

Their job is almost only that: roam in the streets to find people that might need help and give them what they agree to receive. When they manage to build strong

relationships with people, it is a victory. It usually means that they will be able to get to the next phase and hope for improvement.

During the six hours that we wandered in the city, we have encountered five people in the squats we visited, three at The Hotel – an abandoned construction site – and two in the De Kock building – an old office building also now abandoned. Four or five tents were set up in the latter, but none of the inhabitants was there.

***“There are big problems of deal and consumption of drugs in Charleroi. There used to be large gatherings at the Monument but after a series of police raids the dealers are now more scattered in the city.”***

C. B., personal communication, February 18<sup>th</sup> 2022

The two men we met there were not “regulars” of the place because Thomas and Nicolas, the educators I was with at that time, had never met them before, even though they go there quite regularly. So this proves that the number of people living on the streets is growing.

During those few hours, I saw a side of Charleroi that I did not know. Or maybe I did know about it without ever realising the magnitude of the situation. Seeing it is something else. I previously had no idea of how vulnerable homeless people are. It made me want to help them even more.























# Appendix II: Route additional pictures





