Working within the *human* context

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Figure 1: logo PTA

1   Practice based research

What should be the attitude of a designer in today's society where all certainties threaten to disappear? How to contribute something small to society in order to create a stronger tissue, a safety net, a solid foundation. How to pursue a *Joie de vivre* for the users, passers and ourselves ...? What is or could be the role of the designer in this complex world. Those questions are inherent for the practice of architecture, urbanism, an urban design and planning.

In this frame of questions and ambitions, we search for a human based design process. The developing of the method is a research through design, based on the practice of **PTA**.

This practice based research has the goal to develop a method that can be used for **real assignments**, with clients, budgets, realistic programs and restrictions. It is a method based on and made for everyday projects.

2   Method for a *human* based design process

Before introducing the method, we underline that the proposed method is a possible designer attitude. It is not our intention to develop an objective instrument of quality control. There will always be different kinds of architects with different attitudes and interests, which is good.

2.1   Scale indifferent

The method can be used to projects of different scale : from interior architecture to landscape strategies. It is scale indifferent. We think this is important because we believe in **multiscale and transdiciplinary projects**. The distinction between disciplines and scales ((interior) architecture, urbanism, urban planning, ...) is blurring.

2.2   Human context

This paper is an introduction to the (re)search. With the human based design process we aim to attribute something to the human context. We introduce the term human context as : **people alone or in all kinds of compositions** : a couple, a family, a neighbourhood, an age group, a city, a region, ...

Human context means people and **society and all its processes** and actuality.

The human context is in the centre of the presented design method. The method for a human based design process can be summarized in a diagram **(fig.2)**.
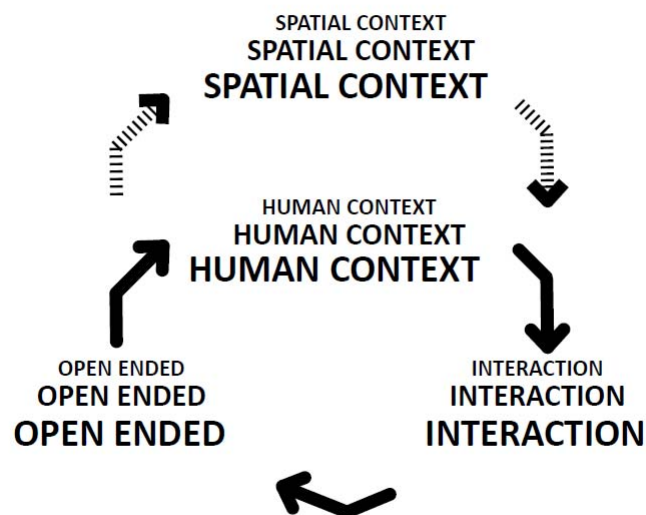

Figure 2: diagram

All assignments, indifferent their scale start from the **spatial context**. The method insist in analyzing the spatial context <u>in different scales</u> and adds the human context as a major precondition of the design process. A good analysis of the human context combines objective and subjective elements, findings and interpretations, text and images, and is the base for a human based design process. There is attention for the different scales and for the dimension of time.

All the relevant information of the human and spatial context can be put together in a **biographical frame** of a plot/ neighbourhood/ ... . This frame is the starting point of the design process and it is the foundation of the project. Relevant aspects of a human context can be:
  -   Too much public space causes little of contact

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- Elderly and their integration in society
- Braindrain in a panoramic landscape
- People of all ages living together in the city
- …

The biographical frame can be constructed by very different sources :
- interviews of keyactors
- photography as an very interesting tool to look in a different way to reality **(fig.3)**.
- a model traveling through the neighbourhood collecting feedback **(fig.4)**.
- organising walk and visits with future users **(fig.5)**.
- …

It is the combination and interaction of the collected material that gives the possibility to crosscheck the value of the information. The biographical frame is by definition subjective, but a subjective understanding of the side is as important as the objective data.

Figure 3: PTA178 . concept study, Geel (© Stijn Beeckman)

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Figure 4: PTA187 . Neighborhood contract 'Zinneke,' Molenbeek

Figure 5: PTA148 . Multifunctional child orientated public building, Molenbeek

2.3   Interactions

Starting from the human context, the method proposes to seek for interactions. It can be interactions of all kinds : between people, between generations, between functions, between inside and outside, between private and public, between rural and city, between human and animal, between present and future, ... The interactions can be situated within the scale of the assignment, but they can also be on a very different scale.

The designer is tempted to search in each design process for assignment relevant interactions. We believe that incorporating interactions of all kind attribute to the human context. This is due to the fact that an interaction enlarges the human context of the project.

We illustrate with some examples :
-    an open facade for a private housing building augments the liveliness of the public space;
-    connecting inhabitants of a neighbourhood in a shared public space **(fig.6)**;
-    interactions between generations in a masterplan **(fig.7)**;
-    incorporating a public bar at the ground floor of a private office building;
-    inviting birds to share a façade **(fig.8)**;
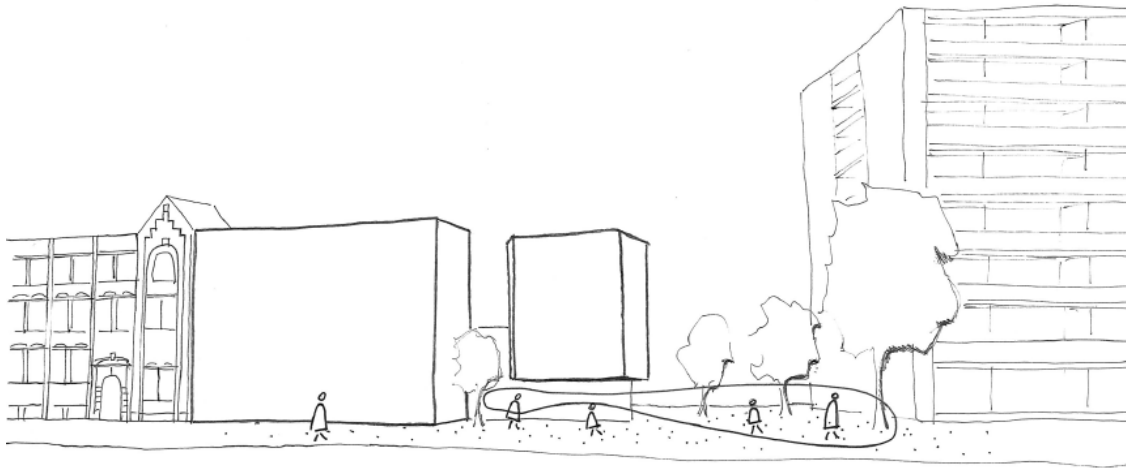-   opening a school to his neighbourhood **(fig.9)**;
-    …

Figure 6: PTA109 . Apartment building, Antwerp

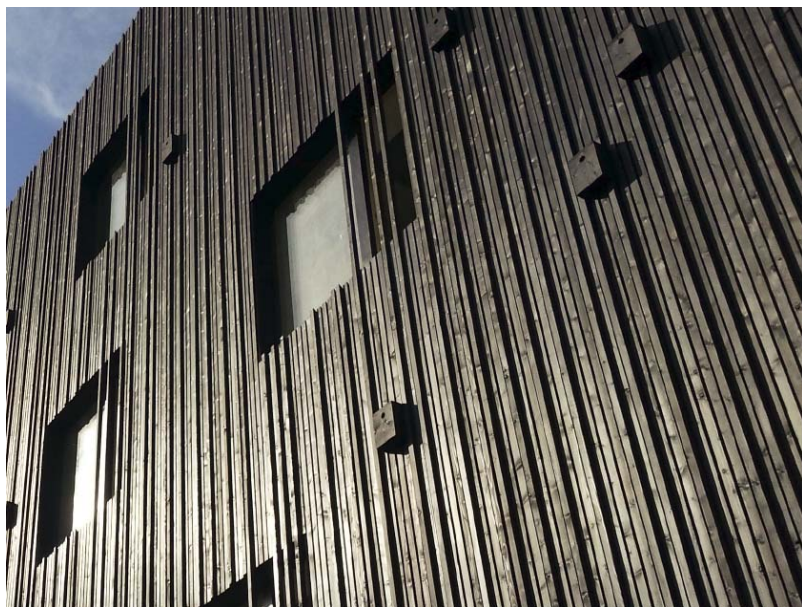*Figure 7: PTA 183 . Masterplan Cappellegoed*

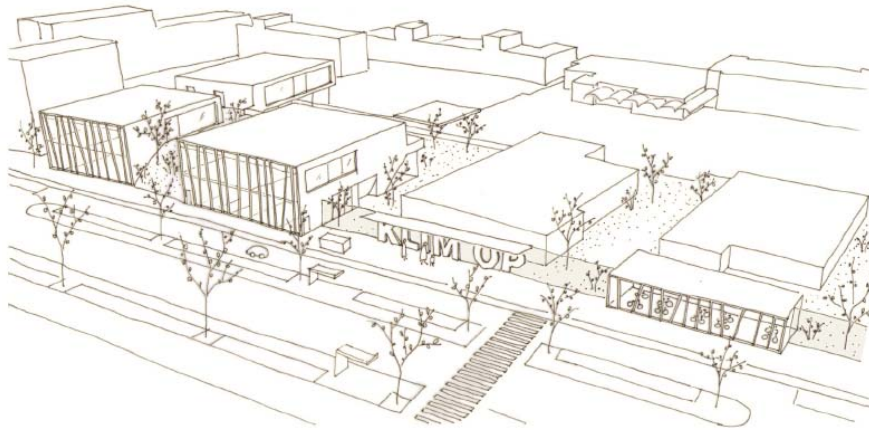*Figure 8: PTA148 . Multifunctional child orientated public building, Molenbeek*

Figure 9: PTA098 . School 'klimop', Vilvoorde

2.4   Open ended thinking

Afterwards or simultaneously the designer is asked to take into account **what we don't know yet**. The method believes in open ended thinking. Today's society evolves very quickly in contrast with building or planning processes which generally keep taking several years. The design has to take this into account and leave enough room for adaptation or evolution.

For example this aspect can be incorporated by :
-   creating multifunctional spaces, using flexible structures, ...
-   designing basic buildings with room for a self-expressing infill, …

But this aim can also be achieved by :
-   respecting the flexibility of a building structure **(fig.10)**
-   rethinking the use of heritage in a flexible way **(fig.11)**
-   incorporating a timeline in the design and making it evolutive **(fig.12)**
-   …
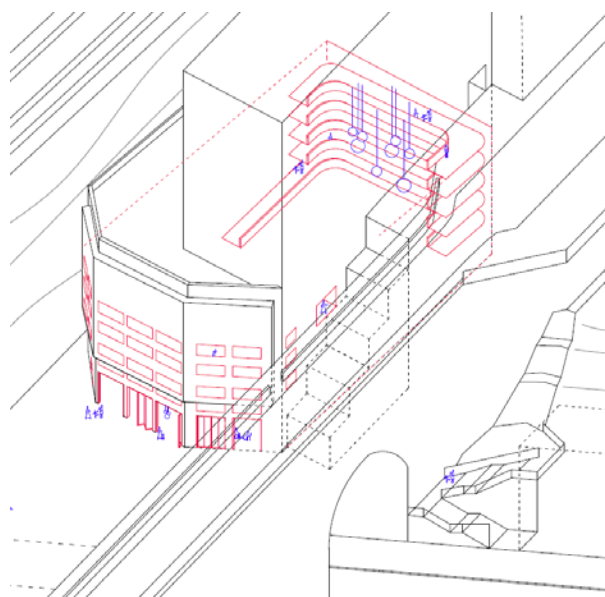

Figure 10: PTA196 . Reconversion Cinématek

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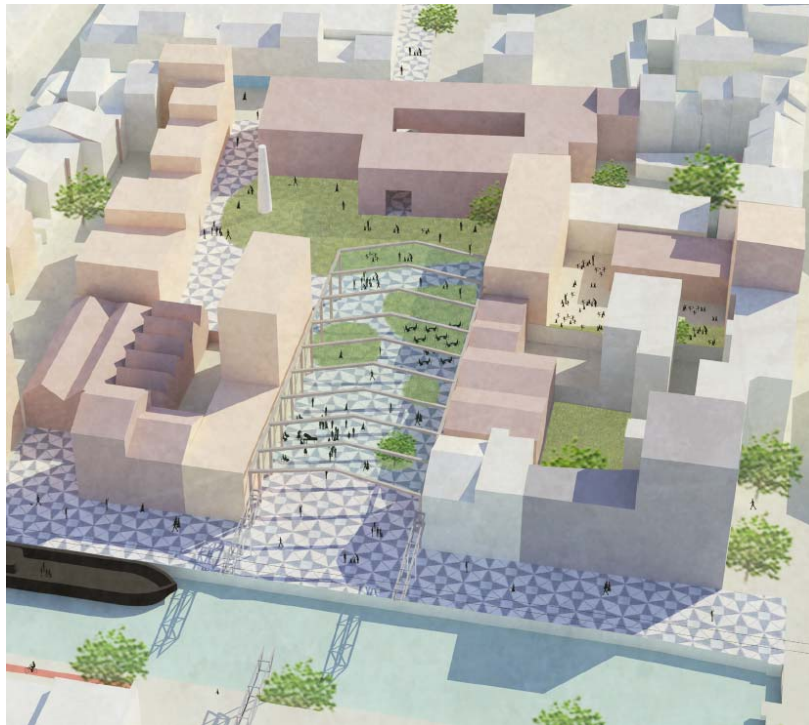Knowledge for better Cities

Figure 11: PTA187 . 'Streefbeeld' Brussels Canal district

The open ended design method resulting in an evolutive design, is illustrated by the project of PTA for the Cadix square in Antwerp. The design incorporates the idea that the current and future inhabitants can rethink parts of the park in function of evolving needs and wishes **(fig.12)**.
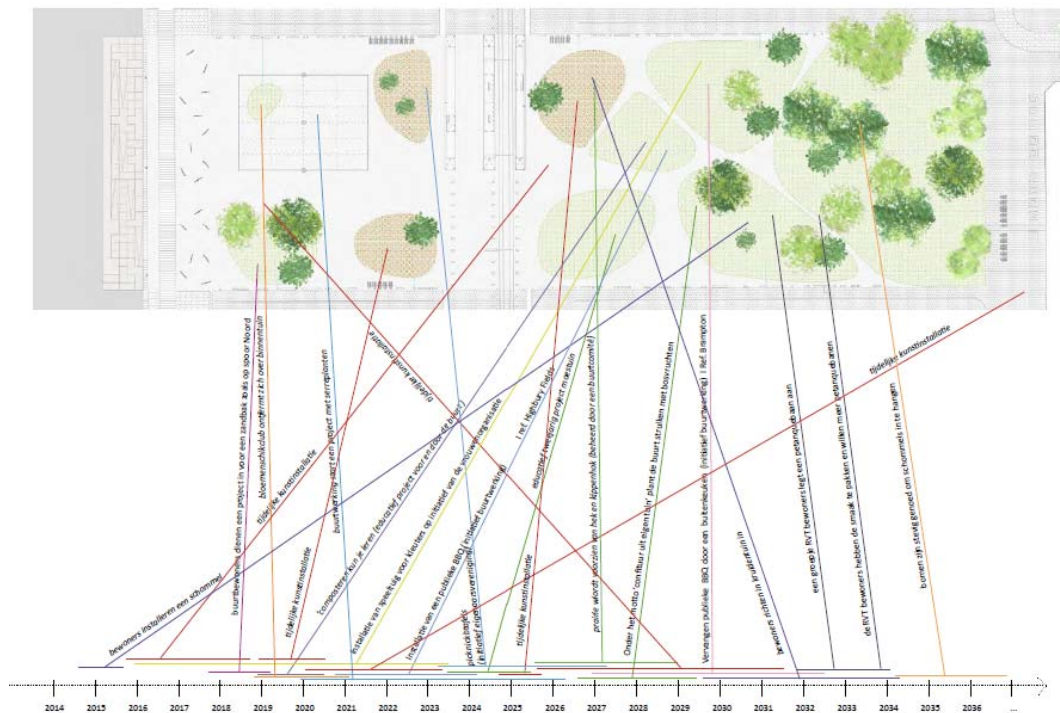

Figure 12: PTA 126 . Cadix square Antwerp – evolving design

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3   Evaluation

The goal of the proposed method is to attribute something to the human context. The design can differ from type and scale :
-    a cohousing project where people enjoy life **(fig.13)**;
-    a visible and open community centre inviting neighbours to meet **(fig.14)**;
-    an apartment building where the living units are personalised**(fig.15)**;
-    a art trial trying to break trough prejudices of bad neighbourhoods;
-    a masterplan in which the interface between private elderly housing and public space has been maximalized to integrate those people in society **(fig.16)**;
-    the project for the cadix square in wich people are activator of transformation **(fig.17)**.

Figure 13: PTA043 . Cohousing project, Brussels

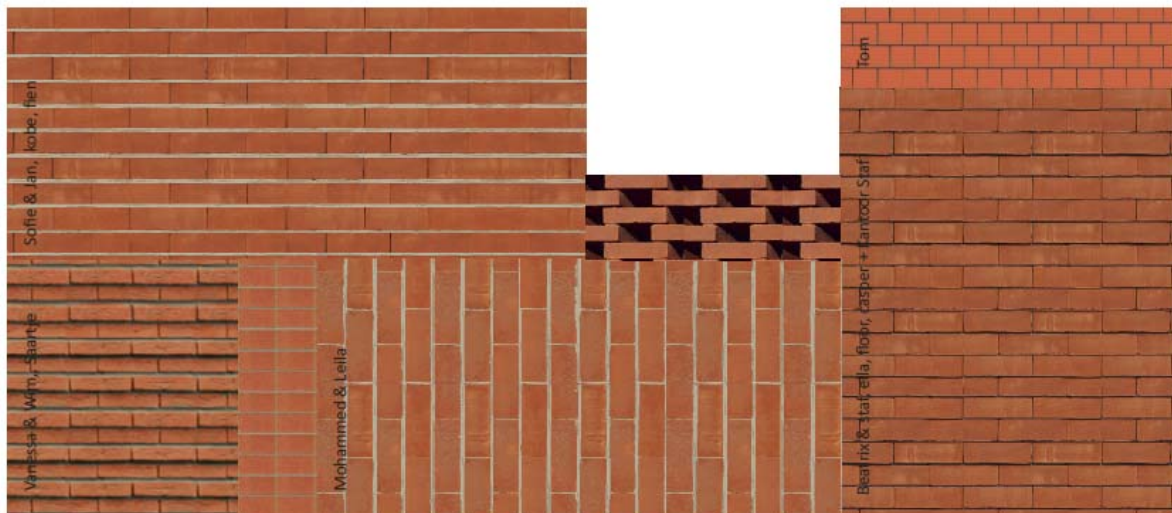*Figure14: PTA023 . Community centre, Hasselt*
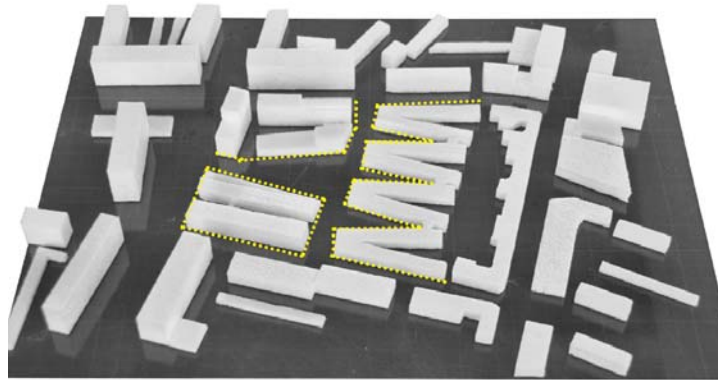

Figure 15: PTA109 . Apartment building, Antwerp

Figure 16. PTA090 . Masterplan Extra Muros Eldery housing, Antwerp

a landscape base + people as activator of transformation

Figure 17. PTA126 . Cadix square Antwerp – concept scheme

An italian architecture critic Bernardina Borra wrote about the design for the Cadix square **(fig. 18)**:

> '*Cadix is a neighbourhood in progress in the old harbour district Eilandje in the north of Antwerp. Massive housing projects are planned and population will multiply in a few years. The park/square is designed to be evolutionary just like the neighbourhood itself. A tram line will cross the square and the former warehouse will be re-used as a covered public space. The landscape gradually turns from park into square in order to collect different potential open space use according to inhabitants wishes and seasonal changes. Around the square are planned new housing, a school, and services for elderly people. The area will cater a diverse social mix in terms of origin and age of the people using the open space in different modes and times of the day during the whole year.*'[1]

Figure 18. PTA126 . Cadix square Antwerp – overview

References:
[1] Borra, Bernardina (2012), Backstage Architecture, Venice, p186 -191