

Nurturing Schorsmolen

A socio-spatial framework for co-creating a liveable future

Introduction:

Cities built by people, for people

The brief to the European describes Schorsmolen as anonymous, with no identity, low social cohesion, and low quality of spaces. This is a typical description of many neighbourhoods, like Schorsmolen, where nothing is inherently wrong, yet they do not seem to function properly.

Following the contemporary, positivist approach to urban planning, one could argue that the solution to improve Schorsmolen, or its sister neighbourhoods around the world, is better design, better planning and higher quality. As if the questions around city planning can be answered with more research, more analysis, more objective measures. As if neighbourhoods are but a collection of empty shells with functions, of amount of houses, and square meters of shops. The city becomes more and more an object to be studied and implemented, rather than experienced. To be used and consumed, rather than lived. And thus, us, its citizens, become mere consumers of the city. Mere numbers in city statistics, rent or mortgage payers, unable to leave a mark in the places where we spend our lives, except for a few flowers hanging from our balconies, or for the most brave of us: a flag.

After endless analyses, studies and models, we start to wonder: why is the modern city still anonymous, with no identity, low social cohesion, and low quality of spaces? Why does it still feel un-human? When looking at an old medieval center, what fascinates us is not the planning, not the studied design, the sun analysis, or the cost-benefit ratio of its development. What fascinates is how dozens of individual interventions manage to build a whole bigger than the sum of its parts. How their sense of community transcends their individual actions. And maybe that's what is missing from our cities: the communities. Maybe it is not enough to design sustainable, efficient, and attractive neighbourhoods. It is also necessary to generate, at the same time, strong and cohesive communities.

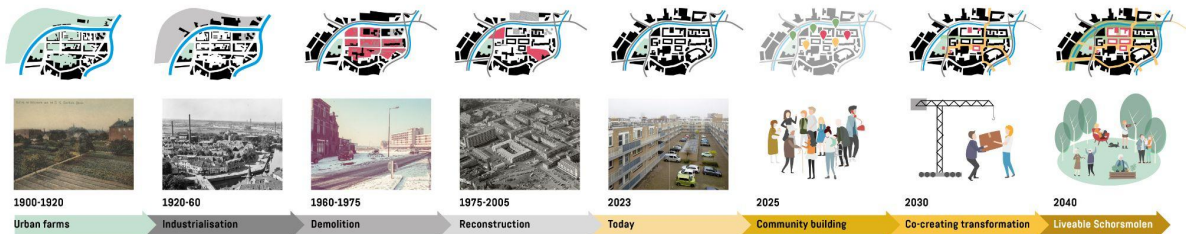
We want to use this submission to European 17 to propose a framework for co-creation of sustainable environments and inclusive communities. At Schorsmolen, we want to nurture communities to overcome the inescapable contemporary curse of anonymity. To do so, we focus less on how to design cities for people, and more on how we can empower citizens to shape their cities.

We start from the assumption that the sense of identity for a place emerges from the recognition of oneself in their own living environment. We feel at home when we recognize the traces of the many little rituals we conduct in our lives. Therefore, we aim to maximise the possibilities for each household to generate a spatial impact in their neighbourhoods. However, we should not throw away all the good learnings that contemporary planning brought us. It is still important to implement sustainable measures, climate adaptiveness, and to respond to unhealthy or toxic dynamics. For these, the role of the local governments remains fundamental to set common rules and targets. In the end, to come full circle on this exploration of a way to nurture living cities, we need to find a new balance in the relationship between inhabitant, land- and homeowners, and local governments.

Schorsmolen:

A history of fractures

Before diving into the dynamics of building communities, it is worthwhile to explain why Schorsmolen offers a perfectly fitting case study. Firstly, by starting with its history. Schorsmolen survived several destructive waves in its recent history. These have left scars in the spatial and social landscape of the neighbourhood, which prevent it from thriving as much as it could.



Until the 1900s, Schorsmolen was an area of urban farming within the fortified city of Breda. The large open spaces occupied by the fields were a perfect location to build new large factories in the early 20th century. These formed the first scars in the spatial tissue, even though the social layer remained strong, as the factories employed the local population. In the 60s, in the name of sanitation and urban “development” more than half of the remaining urban blocks were demolished, the spatial structure was reconfigured partially for the car. This created an enormous scar in the neighbourhood, which lost almost the entirety of its historical buildings, except for the Haagdijk. The realization of the first *zorgcentrum* in Schorsmolen operated another scar, as this was the first building to fully ignore the pre-existing architecture and urban layout. The rebuilding of the rest of the blocks, until the years 2000 was met with criticism by the local population, especially after yet another demolition, that of the industries that settled in the area just a few decades before. Yet another scar, for yet another redevelopment with little to no links to Schorsmolen’s history, identity, and people.

What’s left today is a neighbourhood with a very low sense of belonging, and high feelings of perceived unsafety. The anonymity of the area should come with no surprise to one who knows the history of the area. On a positive note, this neighbourhood is right next to the city centre, it has most amenities within walking distance, presents a high amount of young households, and has the highest density of population in the city of Breda. Yet, most of the starter population lives in single households, in corporation-owned rental apartments, with little to no opportunity to settle permanently in the neighbourhood. All other population segments are underrepresented, especially children, making for an heavily unbalanced and undiversified composition of people.

Our goal is to nurture Schorsmolen to be a neighborhood where people can thrive. To switch from an area where people only sleep, to an area where people live, grow and develop a sense of place. To do so, we propose a plan in short, medium, and long term actions, ranging from building communities, building transformations, and ultimately, building a living Schorsmolen.

A socio-spatial framework for co-creating a liveable future:

To realise a new form of communal living, it is paramount to start from a new land-ownership and management model. In Schorsmolen, the land of three of its blocks are currently owned by housing associations interested in selling the plots. This offers the perfect opportunity to experiment with new forms of urban development.

To nurture a productive environment for co-creation, it is important to provide clear structuring frameworks that balance the needs of Schorsmolen with the rest of Breda.

Shared Mobility: By prioritising shared mobility in Schorsmolen, and accelerating the mobility transition, we unlock more space for qualitative transformation. A ladder structure of public transport corridors connect Schorsmolen with the larger region. The neighbourhood is largely car-free for through traffic and ideal locations for neighborhood mobility hubs are presented within this structure.

Regenerative Ecology: The Middellaan forms an important carrier of biotopes within the neighbourhood and it plugs to the city-wide green structure of the Singelpark. The transformation of Middellaan as a blue-green structure of local importance paves way for a high-quality shared space within the neighbourhood. The internal courtyards with community gardens are connected to Middellaan. This interconnected network helps to ensure optimal climate adaptive pre-conditions for water buffering and temperature control over time.

Empowering communities: Schorsmolen festival on the weekends presents an ideal platform for experimenting with collective actions in the public space. The creation of community co-operatives at the block level presents an ideal platform for introducing collective agency for transformation at the block level. Beyond that, a sequence of public and semi-public shared spaces create a new logic for reconfiguration of the housing blocks.

The socio-spatial actionkit

The socio-spatial actionkit presents a collection of short, medium and long term actions structured around the mobility, ecology and the societal structures in Schorsmolen. These actions are interlinked spatially and temporally as they unlock new possibilities for future actions through integration and/or expansion. The individual actions within the kit are linked to a specific scale and a suggested stakeholder.

The actionkit in the short-term presents a collection of low-cost (both economic and social capital) interventions that can help build momentum towards large-scale transformation. Through these actions the municipality can empower residents to exercise their agency in shaping their own environments.

In the public space, these actions link to a series of tactical urbanism interventions coupled with a neighbourhood festival that presents the platform for experimentation in the short term. At the block level, a community cooperative presents the platform for constructive actions.

The actions that garner the most momentum are scaled up and expanded in the medium-term based on the affordances offered in the socio-spatial framework for the neighbourhood. For example, to re-balance the population structure in the neighbourhood, an additional ~200 single family homes need to be added to the neighbourhood. How and where these units are added are a result of bottom-up deliberations with the residents and there are multiple probabilities facilitated by the actionkit within this structure.

Operationalising action:

Individual actions towards collective goals

At the block level, a community cooperative presents the platform for constructive actions.

01. The creation of a community cooperative at the block level is a precondition for the transformation of the blocks. The cooperative constitutes the housing corporation, municipality of Breda, residents who buy ownership stock and residents who buy rental stock as its stakeholders.

02. To strengthen this co-operative, local actions at the building and block level are taken up. The residents take ownership of the actions, the city supports with funding and technical know-how

03. Successful actions are scaled up at the block level and beyond through larger collective actions.

04. The socio-spatial framework for Schorsmolen suggests ideal densities and a new configuration of the mobility and green blue networks. Cooperatives work together with the municipality to create a starting point that balances city-wide ambitions and the local desires along a spectrum of possibilities

05. The optimal configuration of an urban block is revisited by the cooperative every ten years to see if the urban framework still meets resident demands or not. If enough residents support it, a redevelopment of the block to add more units can be initiated.

In the public space, these actions link to a series of tactical urbanism interventions coupled with a neighbourhood festival that presents the platform for experimentation in the short term and eventual scaling up.

Nurturing Schorsmolen:

Instead of proposing a top-down transformation of Schorsmolen to fit contemporary fascinations, we proposed to create a socio-spatial framework that builds on fundamental principles of urban structures. An action kit of collective actions presents incremental steps towards co-creating Schorsmolen to be more liveable in the future. Through these we aim to nurture Schorsmolen towards its full potential where residents of today and the future can prosper.