The arrival of the high-speed railway between Amsterdam and Paris in 2001 was accompanied by a boom in planning proposals. The new mobility hub had to be equipped with new offices and shops and a new Central Station. Speculation ensued on the property and land holdings. Meanwhile, the area’s neglect continued pending the realization of planning ideas.

During this period, the Delftsehof was developed as a zero-tolerance zone, with boarded-up ground-floor units, vacant buildings, and high crime. Investment in public space and its maintenance was long gone. In the summer of 2001, ZUS [Zones Urbaines Sensibles] architecture bureau established itself in one of the empty buildings and carefully watched these developments.

In 2006, the Municipality of Rotterdam and developers presented a plan for Rotterdam Central District as a glocal city district with a ‘real mix zone’. A high-end public space was proposed; elevated off the ground, crossing over the city’s heavy infrastructure. Additional to this, there would be an ambitious office development and high crime. Investment in public space and its maintenance was long gone. In the summer of 2001, ZUS [Zones Urbaines Sensibles] architecture bureau established itself in one of the empty buildings and carefully watched these developments.

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In 2010, the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (IABR) invited ZUS founders Elma van Boxel and Kristian Koreman to join the Curator Team for its 5th edition in 2012. In this context, Van Boxel and Koreman developed their ideas for Test Site Rotterdam, a research by design project that made the central district of Rotterdam manifest by in fact turning it temporarily into an extra city.

The IABR, as a cultural space and as an international platform, enabled the municipality, property owners and developers to join in a ‘sabbatical detour’, a cultural process in which research by design can add value to existing plans and situations. Starting from the original plans and proposals, workshops with residents and stakeholders explored which ideas could be realized. The idea being that, especially in the face of the financial crisis, initiating small projects can trigger bigger developments, thus putting the area’s potential to the test.

In 2012, ZUS developed 20 pilot projects as part of the Test Site Rotterdam. Each project combined design proposals with an alliance of committed stakeholders, underpinned by a sound business case. New forms of funding prove key to progress: crowdfunding, trading schemes, impact investment, smart partnerships with construction companies. In 2009, Schieblock – as a Test Site project Avant-La-Lettre – was transformed from a vacant office building into a city laboratory and business complex. Ninety companies and a number of cultural institutions settled here. Alongside the De Dépendance, the building’s ground-floor units housed a bar, a cooking laboratory, an information point with bike hire, and a shop for local design products.

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To stimulate public debate on urban development, ZUS launched De Dépendance – a podium for city culture. The area begins attracting interest from business and cultural institutions. An area formerly split by heavy infrastructure from post-war reconstruction – two four-lane carriageways, tramlines, a four-track railway – becomes accessible to pedestrians via the Luchtsingel. The financing of this bridge was initiated through the Rotterdam City Initiative and crowdfunding. In return, crowdfunding had their names or maxims engraved on the bridge’s wooden planks. Consequently, the bridge has around 10,000 co-owners. Navigating the Luchtsingel, allows for new views on this part of the city.

Test Site Rotterdam has become a part of the city centre. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining. The area’s vacancy rate is declining.