

GRADUATION REFLECTION P4  
EXPLORE LAB 22

# ARCHITECTURE & LONELINESS

DESIGNING AGAINST LONELINESS AMONG THE ELDERLY

Amber de Vrede - 4065646  
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## The process

It all started with a fascination for (health)care architecture. The choice to specifically focus on elderly loneliness in relation to architecture came from the fact that this loneliness topic has been very relevant within Dutch society lately.

My first idea was to design a building where elderly people would live together with students, sharing for example functions like the kitchen and the living room. This idea soon turned out to only fit to the wishes of a very small and specific group of people in our society. As I wanted to find a design solution that could function as a general way of living, this intense co-living form needed to be changed.

It became clear that elderly generally desire a high level of privacy, but not sharing anything would not give room for decreasing the chance of becoming lonely, rather the opposite. A solution had to be found in which elderly would keep their desired level of privacy, but at the same time a solution that would give space for creating social interactions. Instead of sharing the living room with others, the solution was going to be searched for within the more public facilities and areas of the living environment. Certain architectural elements, found during the research, are being used to establish these social interactions.

## The relationship between the project and the wider social context

Financial cuts in the Dutch elderly health and home care, together with the phenomenon of greying and the policy of the government to let elderly people live at home as long as possible, makes it extra important to rethink the current state of Dutch elderly housing. As elderly people are a vulnerable group when it comes to becoming lonely, which is a negative state nobody should find itself in, it is necessary to take into account how to decrease the chance of this happening when thinking about one's living environment. Now that the elderly housing situation needs adjustments and changes, it is a perfect moment to give attention to this phenomenon.

The design that has been created during my graduation, is one that takes into account these current developments related to elderly in the Netherlands. It results in a proposal for an architectural design which gives the opportunity to establish social interaction between visitors and dwellers of the area. These interactions help in preventing elderly people from becoming lonely. Furthermore, the design accepts the living preferences of elderly, for example by guaranteeing them a high enough level of privacy. Last but not least, the design gives the possibility of adapting according to the needs of the dwellers. It is suitable for all ages, all types of households and, very important, able to change to one's needs over time.

The thought behind this design is one that could be used in a wider social context. It is a way of dealing with the current situation related to elderly people in the Netherlands. Thus, such type of design, or at least the thought behind it, could be applied in other parts of the Netherlands too. In my opinion it is not only suitable for the Netherlands, but also other countries which have a similar type of society, including (part of) the related problems.

## The relationship between research and design

The design outcome of this graduation project is one that is mainly based on the results and the conclusions of the research part of this project. The research has given a better understanding of the topic of elderly and loneliness. This has been achieved by doing literature studies on these topics, but definitely also by the multiple-choice questionnaire about collective living, filled in by people of ages ranging from teenagers till people in their eighties.

What became clear during the research, is that it is hard to get in contact with elderly people who are living in elderly homes. There seems to be a big barrier between outsiders and the inhabitants of such homes, in my opinion created by the bureaucracy and organisation around it. This made it impossible to receive data about these people for the multiple-choice

questionnaire. Looking back at it, the questionnaire might also have been too hard to fill in for a big part of this group, as they are often facing physical and mental disabilities.

Apart from creating a better understanding of the topics being addressed, the research has also resulted in a list of concrete architectural elements and interventions, which could support the creation of social interaction and, by doing that, the possibility of preventing one from becoming lonely. These architectural results have been the main base for the design of the project. The different architectural elements that came out of the research can be found in the design, from the urban plan all the way to the detailing.

Without the research, the design would have missed a lot of depth and reason to be created. This shows how strong the relationship between the two is, and how important it is to think further than just designing, but to also take into account research papers and input of possible future users when doing so. Partly thanks to the research, the result of the project is not just a design outcome in the form of architectural objects, but a design that has a bigger social impact and which fits to the needs of its users.

### **Looking ahead..**

Currently, the research part of the project is finished. Furthermore, the design part of the project is being worked on. From now on, it will be about bringing all aspects together and creating the products needed to be presented at the P4 and the P5. These products will range from an urban plan until 1:5 details. An essential part of these products is that the research outcome has to be woven into it. When it is possible to establish this, the project is in my opinion a success, as the two main parts, namely research and design, have then become one.