

RESEARCH
PLAN

VACANT HERITAGE DEPARTMENT STORES

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Studio motivation	3
Problem statement.....	4
Research relevance.....	5
Research approach.....	6
Research goal.....	6
Research Question and Method.....	6
Sub-question one	7
Sub-question two	7
Sub-question three.....	7
Sub-question four.....	8
Sub-question five.....	8
Note to method.....	8
Research locations	9
Maastricht.....	9
s-Hertogenbosch.....	9
Self-Assessment	10
Bibliography	11

Image on frontpage taken by the author

Introduction

Studio motivation

As long as I can remember the retail industry has been involved in my life. During my childhood, I frequently went along with my father to his workplace (De Bijenkorf). During these moments me and my siblings would either play around in the offices, walk around the store or lend a helping hand in some of their activities. One thing I vividly remember was helping in putting up the 17-meter-tall Christmas tree in De Bijenkorf in The Hague, which I did every year that my father worked in that department store. As I grew older, I would tag along to a day at my father's work. I actually ended up working there myself. For the last couple of years, I work in the sales department of De Bijenkorf in Rotterdam. And ever since I started my Architecture degree, I wanted to design something to do with department stores. When I found out that the Heritage chair offered a course in which students could work on a new design for one of the vacant Vroom & Dreesmann department stores, my attention was instantly grabbed. I did not bother to look any further, this was my chance.

After deciding on the studio, I had to decide on which research approach I wanted to take. I decided for the Touch and Feel research approach guided by Wido Quist. An approach where the focus is on the materiality and details of a building, rather than the overall ensemble (note that I believe that this should not be disregarded). According to the description of the research method in the studio manual, closely examining the material aspects of a building and how these are perceived by people, allows for a better understanding of the consequences for the adaptive reuse of the building (Quist, 2020). With the primary focus being on the façade of the building, I expect that this research method will offer valuable information for designing a new use where the existing structure and new program join seamlessly. In addition to this, I personally would like to learn more about the technological aspects of heritage architecture. Learning from design practices of the past (how certain elements were designed in the past) I can learn to understand modern techniques better and how the design practice got to our present-day way of designing and constructing.

Furthermore, I know from my personal experience from working in a department store, that the design is really focused on the user/visitor experience. Take for example De Bijenkorf Rotterdam, the store I work at. This department store was built after the Second World War and replaced their other building that was nearby. These two stores were designed with a completely different approach and vision from the architect. Both have/had their strengths and weaknesses of course. The current Bijenkorf has a closed character, with most of its façade openings being the shopping windows. Whereas, the former Bijenkorf was considered the glass and stone palace. Only these two differences in the materiality have such an impact on the experience of the architecture. The closed character allows for a better setting for the shopping experience, but in turn causes the staff to lose orientation in the hallways behind the scenes due to the lack of orientation with the outside world.

Finally, I feel that by focusing on the materiality of this architecture (both current and past design methods) can offer insights on how physical shopping was and is competing with online retail. For example, how the architecture is used to seduce the customer to visit their store to go shopping. This might also offer some interesting angles to see why the Vroom & Dreesmann department stores ended up failing/not working.

Problem statement

The research tries to find a solution to *the lack of engagement between the building its architecture and its surroundings and the people in it*. To get a better understanding of how this problem arose, the history and cause of the problem need to be introduced first.

In the year 1887 the first Vroom & Dreesmann store was opened in Amsterdam. Within 20 years of opening their first store, Willem Vroom and Anton Dreesmann had expanded to more than ten major cities in the Netherlands. The family-owned business grew rapidly and soon became a prominent player in the Dutch retail industry (Miellet, 2001). Up until the 1980's the company kept growing steadily, but faced financial problems in 1991. With a last-minute rescue plan, the company managed to prevent a bankruptcy that year and made changes within the company (Koops, n.d.). Only in 2008 Vroom & Dreesmann opened their online store, which was relatively late when compared to rival companies. The online retail industry heralded the eventual end of almost 130 years of Vroom & Dreesmann. Eventually on the 31st of December 2015 the court declared bankruptcy and the stores closed their doors for good in February the following year (Koops, n.d.).

The bankruptcy of the Vroom & Dreesmann department store brand resulted in a significant amount of large vacant buildings throughout the Netherlands. A total of 62 stores were forced to close. This added up to a total of 350.000 square meters of vacant retail space (Raven, 2017). To put this in perspective, the total amount of vacant retail space was 3.03 million square meters in 2016 (CLO, 2019). This means that the former Vroom & Dreesmann stores make up just over 11.5% of the total vacant retail space in the Netherlands. However, in 2016 the Canadian Hudson's Bay Company found themselves interested in expanding their brand to The Netherlands. A year later they opened their first new department stores. The department stores unfortunately had to close permanently on the last day of December in 2019 as the company was declared bankrupt that day (Stil, 2019). Leaving 16 recently renovated department stores vacant.

The main problem that this is addressed in this research is a result of the above-mentioned events. Due to bankruptcy of Vroom & Dreesmann and later also Hudson's Bay, a lot of the former department stores became a cavity in the urban fabric. These buildings that were once flourishing with people doing their shopping, are now left empty without a purpose. These department stores used to not only function as a place where people went shopping, but also served a purpose as a place where people could gather and meet up. Before moving to Delft, I lived in Bergen op Zoom for 18 years. A city of decent size with two main shopping streets. At the corner of these two streets, the former Vroom & Dreesmann was situated. This is where I would meet up with friends and/or family. These stores function as an eye catcher that generate traffic within the city, something that is necessary for a balance within the retail environment of a city (Brouwer, 2018). But specifically, that lack of traffic is a problem for a lot of cities. How people move through cities is extraordinary, everyone has their own purpose and their own route to fulfill that purpose, some people come with the purpose of not having a purpose and just wander around. To solve the vacancy problem of these former department stores, a solution needs to be found that addresses the issue of the lack of engagement between the building and its surroundings and everyone in it.

Research relevance

As mentioned in the problem statement, the research addresses the problem of the lack of engagement between the architecture of the building and its surroundings and the people in it. By solving this problem, the vacancy problem of the Vroom & Dreesmann department stores in general can be solved. Although some of the Vroom & Dreesmann buildings have a new occupant and/or function, a large amount of these stores is still vacant. The former department stores in small and medium sized cities like Delft and Bergen op Zoom were generally not the largest department stores of the company, making it easier to find a new (temporary) function. In the larger cities, like Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Maastricht, the department stores were replaced by Hudson's Bay and are now often vacant again. Due to their size, it is much more complicated to find a fitting new function. Leaving the city with that 'cavity' in its fabric. As these buildings play(ed) a prominent role in the retail areas of cities, as they are (usually) found in key locations in the city center. With the decline in physical retail, the deterioration process of the city fastens. But the fact that they are located at these key locations means that they cannot simply be ignored or neglected (Chandali, Droogh, Dicou, & Eijkelkamp, 2013). It is therefore relevant to research how the architectural expression of the building engages with its surroundings and the people moving through the public and private space, to be able to develop a proposal for a potential redevelopment of the building. Furthermore, this will also contribute to the redevelopment process of other vacant heritage and how to approach their architecture while considering its surrounding environment.

Research approach

Research goal

Based on the assumption that the former Vroom & Dreesmann were usually situated in prominent locations within cities, this could be on or near the market square or at a high traffic shopping street. Examples of these are the Vroom & Dreesmann in Amsterdam at the Kalverstraat, the store in Rotterdam at the Hoogstraat or the store in Den Bosch at the Schapenmarkt. These are just three simple examples of former department stores that are all at prominent locations, one at a high flow shopping street, one at a prominent location based on sightlines and the last one at the market square. Where these department stores used to have a presence in the city, attracting and gathering people, they now are obsolete to the daily city life. The absence of Vroom & Dreesmann, but the physical presence of what is once used to be, has an unpleasant and empty effect on the passerby. As mentioned in the Studio Text, the architectural expression has a consequence for the perception of it by the people, but in turn the actual function (the spirit of the place) also influences the perception of the same object (Quist, 2020). It is in fact quite extraordinary how architecture is able to evoke such emotions in people.

To be able to develop a fitting new design for these former department stores, a better understanding of these structures and how they relate to the surroundings and the people in them is required. By understanding this phenomenon better, the actual design proposal can be fitted better to its architecture and surroundings. The main objective of this research is to develop an assessment framework for the building, which can be applied to make these inanimate objects engage with its surroundings and the people in it once again.

Research Question and Method

This research aims to find an answer to the following question in order to achieve the research goal:

“How does the architecture of the former Vroom & Dreesmann department store engage in the relation between the public, semi-public and private space and the people moving within and between these spaces and how can this be applied in the new design?”

To find an answer to the above-mentioned research question, the question can be broken down into sub-questions. These help to target both the analysis and the research to the specific topics in order to compose the complete picture. As there are many different methods to conduct scientific research, each research question may require a different approach to finding an answer to the question. In Klaske Havik her lecture on *Methods of Analysis*, she introduces these different approaches of research (Havik, 2020). These approaches are all different in the nature of their method, of which some are more applicable to this research than others. The answer to the main research question is found by studying and analyzing two case study department stores, which classifies as correlational research approach. These two case studies are then researched on its own using other different research approaches. A historical research approach is for example a good way to understand information about the department stores using material from the archives (Havik, 2020). Each of the paragraphs following the sub-questions will elaborate more on the proposed method(s) to find the answer to the respective question.

Sub-question one

“How does the architecture of the former Vroom & Dreesmann department store fit in with its context?”

The first sub-question in this research is aimed at creating an initial understanding of the researched projects and their context. Although many city centers in The Netherlands share similar characteristics, each and every city is different. For the research this means that the direct surroundings and context of each of the researched Vroom & Dreesmann department stores is different as well. Even though some of the former department stores have things in common, for example that they were designed by the same architect, designed and built at the same time or share similar architectural characteristics, every department store is unique to its place and time. By conducting a typological research, plan analysis, the foundation of this research is built and an initial understanding of how the department store fits in its context and operated (Havik, 2020). The research for this sub-question is closely related to the *Spatial Building Typology Research* that is carried out by the research group of Hielkje Zijlstra. In a similar fashion, the case study department stores are analyzed and documented.

Sub-question two

“How is the former department store of Vroom & Dreesmann perceived by the people in the shopping street?”

This sub-question tries to discover how the case study buildings are perceived by the people that surround them. As every building is different, their effect on the perception of the building is different. The scale of the façade with its materials, for example, can influence how someone perceives the building (TMD STUDIO LTD, 2017). As the perception of an object is unique and subjective for every human being, a simulation research approach is taken. By simulating the perception of the building from multiple angles and distances, a clearer image can be created of how the perception of the building changes while moving around it. In addition to this, these findings will then be tested against the book *Life between Buildings* by Jan Gehl, which goes in depth about how spaces are lived in and perceived (Gehl & Koch, 2011).

Sub-question three

“How do the entrance opportunities engage in a relation between the public and private space?”

Department stores are usually accessible through various entrances along the facades of the building, depending on the size of the building. The main entrance is usually found, like in any other building, at the ground floor level on the main façade. However, there are multiple other places through which a building might be accessed. Entrances can also be found on different levels of the building granting access through another building or from an exterior vertical circulation space. To get a better understanding of the relation between the public, semi-public and private space it is important to know how the specific building is accessed. As the relation between these spaces can sometimes be indicated in a problematic way, take for example a semi-public space that is closed off with a gate after opening hours, it is necessary to get a better understanding of the relation between the public, semi-public and private zones.

This sub-question is answered by conducting a material and spatial analysis of the entrances and the way it connects the public and private (and every) space in between of both present and past situations. In his book *Constructie en architectuur van winkelpuizen*, G.J. Wattjes conducts a visual descriptive analysis of shop windows (Wattjes, 1926). This method proves to be a good foundation to get a better understanding of the specific entrance elements. In addition to this, the spatial perception of these elements is simulated by illustrating and comparing them in a single scale. In these drawings the material detail is made abstract. Finally, the different material components (both façade elements as surface materials) of the entrances are inventoried. Each of these materials has its own characteristics and qualities, which in turn affect the perception of the space (Soliman, 2013).

Sub-question four

“How do the visual advertising opportunities engage in the relation between the public and private space?”

Department stores, like most other businesses, advertise themselves using elements in their façade. Examples of these are the brand logo on the facades, posters or other imagery on the façade and the shop windows. Advertising on the façade is used as a method to seduce the passerby to enter and induce them to make a purchase (Joo-Hyun & Kyu-Hye, 2015). Regardless of the new function of the department store is going to be retail, this phenomenon can be used in the advantage of the new design. In a similar way the new function(s) may use advertising techniques to attract visitors. Therefore, it is important to research the branding of the structure to then be able to enhance the visibility and recognizability of the building in the future.

The search for an answer to this question starts by mapping out the advertisement opportunities in the facades. This is researched by examining archival material (mainly photographs). These advertising opportunities are then categorized by type (brand logos, posters, shop windows). For each of these the amount of opportunities and the available space per type is determined by measuring. Finally, for each of the advertisement opportunities the effectiveness is researched. Using the book *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising* by Paul Messaris in which he describes how visual advertising is used and how people are triggered by this and using the book *Measuring Advertising Effectiveness* by D.B. Lucas and S.H. Britt that provides descriptions and evaluations of the methods of measurement of effectiveness, the effectiveness of each of the advertisement types is determined (Lucas & Britt, 1963; Messaris, 1997). This translates into a set of advertising opportunities sorted by their type, effectiveness and scale.

Sub-question five

“How do the openings in the façade on elevated levels engage in the relation between the public and private space?”

The facades of the former Vroom & Dreesmann stores do not only open up to the public on the ground floor level, but also on the elevated levels. Through openings in the facades (windows or balconies) the scale and proportions of the building are defined. These openings also offer an opportunity to provide the interior space with a natural source of light. However, it cannot simply be assumed what the actual function of these openings are. They can serve a functional purpose, but also a purely decorative purpose. Throughout the years their purpose might have changed as well. For the new design of the department store it is important to be aware of the placement of these openings in relation to its surroundings. For each of these openings it is therefore important to determine their relative height to the floor and ceiling, positioning in the façade, materiality, area, distance to facades on the opposite side of the road and their angle towards the sun. Using this information, the previous and potential future use can be determined by simulating sightlines to the public space and by testing them for daylight entry levels. This in turn also works in reverse, the sightlines from the public space towards the façade openings can be simulated. This research will be carried out using the publication by Aydin Ozdemir that examines the effects of window view on the perception of spaciousness and brightness in a building (Ozdemir, 2010).

Note to method

This research is carefully divided into several components of the building. However, not all the physical elements in the building its skin is researched. One of the elements that is not researched is the roof of the buildings. To limit the scope of this research these are purposely ignored. The roofs are too far away from the public space to be able to properly engage in the relation between public, semi-public and private space.

Research locations

As there is a large number of vacant Vroom & Dreesmann department stores within The Netherlands, the research needs to be focused on specific case study projects. The two department stores that are researched and analyzed are situated in Maastricht and 's-Hertogenbosch. These two cities are both considered one of the oldest cities in The Netherlands. With this comes a rich history of city life. These cities have grown organically over the years and are characterized by their traditional architecture.

Maastricht

The former Vroom & Dreesmann is situated in the Grote Staat shopping street in Maastricht, which is one of the main shopping streets in the city. It was built in 1932 and has been there ever since. In these almost 90 years, the building has changed multiple times. It grew larger, became smaller and was adapted to fit modern necessities better.



Image 1, Vroom & Dreesmann Maastricht (ANP, n.d.)



Image 2, Vroom & Dreesmann in map of Maastricht, map edited by author (Openstreetmap.org, 2020a)

's-Hertogenbosch

The Vroom & Dreesmann in 's-Hertogenbosch (or *Den Bosch*) is located at the Schapenmarkt, at the corner of the main market square in the city. The department store was built in 1931, designed by Oscar Leeuw, and takes up a large space next to the city its town hall.



Image 4, Vroom & Dreesmann 's-Hertogenbosch (Bolsius, n.d.)



Image 3, Vroom & Dreesmann in map of 's-Hertogenbosch, map edited by author (Openstreetmap.org, 2020b)

Self-Assessment

In the past weeks I have worked hard on building a proper research plan. During my six years of studying at the Faculty of Architecture in Delft I have written plenty of essays, papers and researches, but never had I focused on the actual plan for the text this much. The careful yet strong approach to building a plan for a research did however help me in finding a better direction for both my research and my future design.

At first however, I was not really sure where and how to start. This resulted in me working on things of which I really was not too sure about if it was even the right thing to do. Eventually, after I managed to come up with something to research and some ideas to research this, I started to get the hang of what I was doing. In the 1.5-2 weeks before the P1 presentation, I really started understanding myself and what I was trying to do. This resulted in a sudden big development in my research plan. For the P1 presentation, where I tried to present as much as I could about my ideas for the research (plan), I received some very valuable feedback to process. I was made aware of some vague aspects of my research plan and tried to make these more explicit. Furthermore, the overall academic quality was still lacking quite a bit in the research plan.

The reason for this was both the fact that I was not sure how to approach my methodology of the research and that I had a hard time following all the lectures of the research plan course. The weekly lectures, on Thursdays, coincided with my studio tutorials. It would often happen, that we were still in a tutorial session while the lecture had already started. I tried catching up sometimes, but at other moments I was simply not able to do so. As I usually try to process the feedback from a tutorial session immediately after it ends.

As mentioned in my studio motivation, I decided for the Heritage & Architecture | Vacant Heritage Studio based on a strong personal motivation. Because of my father, who has worked in a department store as long as I can remember, and eventually me working in one as well, I have a reasonable amount of knowledge about department stores from my personal experience. At some points, while writing my research plan, I noticed that my personal experience became a dominant factor. I had to try and avoid this to make sure I was developing something that met the requirements of an academic text.

For the most of the time while writing my research plan, I had no clear idea of what I wanted to do for the design during the second semester. This meant that I had no direction I wanted to go in in terms of my research plan. Because of this, I decided to let my research plan be a leading factor. I had some interesting ideas of what I wanted to research and my results will hopefully be in line with what I want to design later this year.

A few weeks ago, I attended the masterclass session. With the entire Vacant Heritage group, we joined the 'what-if' masterclass. During this masterclass we explored past design proposals that were never realized. I was and still am not too sure about how this related to the graduation studio that I am in, but it was definitely interesting to learn something more about. Aside from the fact that it had little to do with my studio assignment, it led me to rethink the way I take a stand towards these kinds of proposals.

To conclude, I believe that I learned a lot about building a strong plan for a research in the past weeks. As I mentioned in the beginning, I never carefully made a plan like this for my research. But it did however show me the importance and benefits of actually doing it.

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