

reflection

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Over the past years of studying Architecture in Delft, I have developed a fascination for consumption and architecture, as well as the influence of the built environment on people, their behaviors, and experiences. Dipping my toes into the worlds of retail design, neuroeconomics and brand experience design during two minors and an internship, as well as into the world of a research heavy studio during Complex Projects: In Chicago, has strengthened the aspiration to combine these topics in my graduation project.

The relationship between the theme of the graduation lab and the subject

Explorelab has provided me the opportunity to combine these fascinations into a graduation project, doing research on the experience of shopping areas, and designing an environment related to this.

With an emphasis on research as a basis for design, and a freedom to use a broad range of research directions and methods, Explorelab has been the right fit for my personal design process. Focusing not just on spatial context, but also the wider social context and the human scale in design, the research has provided a broad base for the design, and the time set to explore and develop focus has proven to be beneficial to the design process.

The freedom that comes with choosing your own tutors, topic, and process, however, has also proven to be difficult, as my broad range of interests, and consequently a somewhat unstructured research process, has led to a change of tutors, and a longer time spent doing research.

The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen

Explorelab provides the opportunity to do broad and extensive research using methods fitting the topic and interest of the student. In order to answer the research question *“which spatial aspects of Dutch inner city shopping areas influence the shopping/leisure experience?”* I have used multiple research methods.

A literature study forms the basis of the research, providing background information on the relationship between space, behavior, and experience. A combination of literature from a variety of different fields, such as environmental psychology, consumer behavior, and urban sociology, has been used to shape an understanding of how people may experience space and how this can be measured. With this information, observations have been carried out in different shopping areas, documenting people’s behavior in relation to their environment.

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May, 2018

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Finally, an analysis of the observations using the knowledge from the literature study, as well as additional information from literature specifically on people's behavior in space, has formed an answer to the posed research question.

The relationship between research and design

The research has impacted the design in two different ways. Firstly, the broad exploration of the topic of shopping/leisure experience has led to the formation of a design brief focusing on experience, rather than fast consumption of products. By adding a foodhall and flex work/studyspaces to the specific part of Delft city center in which my design site is located, a destination for longer stay is created. The sensory experience, social aspects, fun, and freedom of the foodhall can fulfill different leisure needs, and thus facilitate desired behavior and experience. The addition of flex work/studyspaces add another dimension to the place, and fit the current trend of blurring between work and leisure, as well as fulfill the need for workspaces outside of the office or home environment. Freedom of choice in the use and experience of the building are also important factors in the formation of a pleasant experience and potential place attachment.

Secondly, the spatial elements resulting from the analysis of the observed spatial behavior have been implemented in the design. The design is made up of the spatial elements facade, space, and objects, of which the properties and relationships can elicit certain behavior. This behavior is closely related to the (leisure) experience people have in the space. Starting out from the desire to create a certain experience, in this case a leisure experience, the environment in which this experience should be had can be designed in such a way that it enables the behavior related to this experience. This has been taken into account through the different scales of the building, from its place in the urban context, to the details.

The process of creating this experience through the spatial elements resulting from the research has not always been done by very conscious considerations in my design process. Intuition and the overarching concept of the foodhall and architectural design have played a large role in the decisions made. However, the underlying idea of designing to fit people's needs and to create a certain leisure experience, which is very much related to feelings and emotions instead of rational thoughts, has been a guide throughout the design process. Looking back, because of the nature of experience, a very rational design process would probably not have fit the project.

By at some point going back and forth between research and design, instead of following a linear approach in which the research is (mostly) finished before the design process, I have found that the research became more focused. Designing at the same time highlighted the need for a more specific outcome of the research in relation to spatial aspects influencing experience, and sharpened the analysis of the observation results, whilst also allowing for a more intuitive approach in the design process.

The relationship between the project and the wider social context

Retail is changing. Technological advancements, such as online shopping, but also demographic changes, societal changes, and economic developments are changing the way people buy. Consumers have become more mobile, and the internet provides more options and functionality than the average physical shopping area. The discrepancy between consumer needs and physical shopping areas has led to a total vacancy rate of Dutch retail floor area of 9.15% in 2017.

High vacancy rates in shopping areas not only affect the retail (property) market, it also has a direct impact on the experience of the shopping area. Vacancy within a shopping street or area impacts the direct surroundings negatively; lack of activity, visitors and passersby, as well as physical decay of buildings and their direct surroundings influence the safety and experience of the area, whilst shopping areas have been deemed to be an important feature for the attractiveness, vitality, and liveability of towns and cities.

Multiple actors, like local and higher governments, real estate investors and developers, and shopkeepers, have joined forces and come up with different strategies on how to deal with vacancy in shopping areas. Many of the proposed solutions are still focused on the 'market' side of the problem, introducing changes in policies, visions, and regulation of (transformation of) shopping areas. All these proposed changes have (indirect) spatial consequences, but the spatial characteristics of retail areas are not the direct focus.

In addition, these platforms agree that physical retail is becoming part of the 'experience economy', in which not the purchase of products, but the shopping experience is the main focus of a shopping trip. These shopping areas should thus be (re)designed to fulfill the needs associated with this experience.

Approaching the problem of vacancy from spatial point of view, the project explores spatial solutions to cope with vacancy in shopping areas and at the same time restoring and/or improving the experience of these areas.