

Reflection – Explore Lab, Graduation

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I. Graduation Topic & introduction

This graduation project began with a personal fascination for feeling present and connected to one's direct surroundings. This year has been an attempt to academically theorise and address these feelings of being present and to come up with an approach to design interventions to create or reinforce such experiences. The goal of the research phase was to identify design principles and types of (embodied) experiences to understand how objects in (semi-)public spaces influence the visitor's experience.

The design phase focused on creating interventions that connect city inhabitants to the layered pasts of their city, with a special focus on materiality and nature inclusivity. The found design principles in the research phase guided the creation of these interventions. In the context of this project, the city of Amsterdam was chosen as a test ground, but these types of projects can be created in other cities as well. This city was chosen since it is my home town and I can experience feelings of disconnectedness in this city myself. The project offered an interesting opportunity and challenge to explore and experience my surroundings in a new way.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Leontine de Wit, Rufus van den Ban, and Elise van Dooren, for the support, feedback, and inspiring examples, which has helped to improve my focus and argumentations. Their openness and enthusiasm toward my ideas have encouraged me to develop and value them further. Reflecting on this past year, I have learned to explore my fascinations in greater detail, deepening my understanding and enhancing my approach to design.

II. Relation between graduation topic, the master architecture track and studio program (Explore Lab)

The Explore Lab studio provided an opportunity to delve into my personal fascinations and interests. Formulating my own project was both interesting and challenging. Throughout my studies, I always received a design brief and a specified location for the project. This year's openness and undefined end result made it a more difficult process. This graduation period has been a good test to develop and feel more secure about my ability to design, but also my 'design thinking' skills. This iterative process of creating something new from a given situation, while developing my own guidelines, was an ideal way to conclude my master's studies with greater knowledge and insight.

In the bigger context, my graduation project delves into a specific type of architecture that is focused on experience, presence, and connection to a shared history. Throughout my studies, I have enjoyed developing the narrative of my projects and linking it to the history of the location, while looking for suited materials and experiences. This project represents a combination of deeply investigating the site and its history with the creation of a shared

experience for city inhabitants, connecting them to their own inner worlds and immediate surroundings.

III. How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

The research was fuelled by the need to create spaces that can counterbalance overstimulating city life, encouraging people to connect more with their surroundings. The focus was on identifying different spaces (artistic/architectural) that facilitate these direct experiences. Throughout the research, the configuration and components of these spaces/objects were identified. By analysing different projects in more detail and finding out how they direct an individual's attention and how they affect these visitors, it became more straightforward how to integrate such elements successfully in urban spaces. Furthermore, it became apparent that there are different ways of 'inviting' people to be more in contact with their surroundings.

The study revealed a categorisation of different (embodied) experiences of objects in (semi-)public spaces. According to this categorisation, (embodied) visitor experience can be subdivided into contemplation, experiment/play, movement, surprise/wonder, and (unexpected) social interaction. It is through different architectural tools that these types of experiences are achieved. For example, the use of solid and heavy materials is used in a few examples of the category contemplation. The solidity of the materials can have a grounding effect on the visitor.

In the end, my design focus was mostly on connecting to a shared history through material use and creating atmospheres. Though, the tools found in the research were also integrated in the design. My three interventions all invite movement, but also offer places for the individual to sit and reflect. Furthermore, there are elements of surprise/wonder by framing different views throughout the structures. Lastly, I tried to extend this concept of connecting to the environment also in the methods for my design. Walking was an important element of finding a location for my interventions; experiencing the city in this different rhythm offered new feelings and inspirations.

IV. How did you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

Initially, my approach consisted of collecting different examples. Though, finding the right words and categories was difficult through solely analysing the objects in architectural dimensions. While talking to others and integrating online reviews, I figured out that this experience and feeling of being more connected to surroundings can be different for others. This made me integrate short interviews about several projects, to find more words and categorisations for these types of experiences. This extra dimensions of analysis helped me to find common denominators and also helped in verifying the different categories. The different steps of the research were of an iterative character; once projects started to have clear similarities with one another and might belong to the same category, projects of that character were no longer looked for. For the design, I tried to come up with an approach that would be understandable by other students as well; section VI discusses this in more detail.

V. How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

The academic and societal value of my project were mostly explained through the use of literature. Different philosophers and architects have touched upon the themes of 'being present' within modern city environments. Encountering these explorations and conceptualisations were a confirmation of the relevance of my project. The critiques on the fast pace and overstimulating environments of modern cities highlight the societal need to create places that can counterbalance these environments. Additionally, throughout my explorations I found that connecting to a shared past has gained increased attention through various initiatives. For example, Instagram accounts highlighting certain places in the city by telling stories about their history. But also theatre performances integrating a historical route, or interactive museum exhibits that focus on local heritage.

My project shows the potential of different places in the city to connect people to a shared history (in this example Amsterdam, but it is applicable elsewhere). The interventions oppose to the trend of disconnecting and hectic life. They are places that offer exploration, calmness, but also the opportunity to alter to the needs of contemporary city inhabitants. Also, my interventions leave something behind, augmenting historic, current, or potential qualities. The projects show a value of not being clearly programmed and being open to change.

VI. How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

Whereas the end-result of my design is very location-bound, the approach is not. My supervisors challenged me to write out a design approach that can be used to find a location and create a material strategy that can help as guidance in the design phase. The interventions are a result of applying an approach of experiencing the city in a slow rhythm (walking) and, simultaneously, connecting to written/oral (hi)stories. Additionally, the city and its layered past forms the input for the choice in materials (see section VII). This approach can be used elsewhere by other designers. I tried to assess the transferability by pretending that I gave this design task to a other students and discussing it with them. I kept on rephrasing and restructuring the approach until it would make sense to give the assignment to other people that were not part of my process.

VII. Materiality – making visible city layers

An important aspects of my design is the materiality of the interventions. The main ingredient of my design is wood. This material literally makes visible the historical layer of a material that has been used throughout Amsterdam's history. Also, this offers the opportunity to raise awareness about the possibilities of reuse. The city contains many structures of wood (in houses, structural piles, and for example quays). Also, the three locations of my design individually add an extra material that is fit to this location. Though, it has been quite a search to find the material that is most suitable; history and my interpretation of it is subjective. Furthermore, finding the right material has been a quest of finding the right argumentation and also translating my 'feelings' with a place into something concrete. There is not a universal set of rules that can effectively serve in an attempt to visualise a layered past within the city. Not only is a city's history extensive and complex, it is also a personal exploration of the designer. As a result, I found myself questioning whether my work would resonate with others. I tried to substantiate my choices by talking to other students and friends, aiming to create a more inclusive and 'universally' appealing design. This collaborative approach helped me validate my ideas and refine my project.

VIII. Lessons learned from the (design) process

A learned lesson is to 'just get started'. Often my ideas hover in the conceptual phase for quite some time and I always find it difficult to make the first step materialising them. The Explore Lab studio, in particular, provides space to immerse yourself in your ideas and explore several lines of thought. While I enjoyed this process, it also turned out to be tricky since I had to converge these concepts and ideas into a design. My supervisors stimulated me to get started, think about space, make models, which eventually helped me get into a flow. However, if I were to go through this process again, I would try to start the practical aspects earlier.