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This paper is a reflection on the graduation year 2023/2024 in the studio of Designing for health and care in an inclusive environment.

At the beginning of this year the first thing we had to do was get our target group clear, by defining current problems in society. I struggled choosing between people who had mental issues or focusing on elderly with dementia. At the end I decided to focus on people with dementia, because this will be the main problem in society, and because of personal cases of people around me suffering from dementia.

This graduation topic of designing for people with dementia fits well within the studio focus of designing for care in an inclusive environment. These people will need more care as the dementia progresses. Architecture can guide them and keep them part of society for longer, instead of locking them up in a care home.

The topic is relevant for society, since more and more people will have to deal with dementia themselves or have relatives or family members with dementia. Sufficient housing is needed for them to keep a qualitative life.

This research adds the current proven positive impact of biophilic design to the whole spectrum of designing for people with dementia. It also takes into account that the number of people providing care will decrease. Therefore this research integrates, among other things, ideas of promoting the independence and freedom of people with dementia.

For this research the fieldwork week was a big source of information. I got the opportunity to stay in an elderly care facility. There was the opportunity to get home care. There was also a closed facility for people who needed 24/7 care. This is where the people with severe dementia stayed.

Personal contact with the target group gives insight in what they really need, and how architecture influences their lives. Gathering information was mostly done by observing their behavior, the spaces they used and the activities they did. Since talking was difficult sometimes, their relatives and caregivers provided me with a lot of information too.

Another source of input was literature. The processing of the data was done on three scales: dwelling, building, surroundings. Within these scales there were four main topics in which all information could be divided: distinctiveness, familiarity, independence and biophilic. This organizational method worked really well. The conclusions are clear and easily applicable.

It was good that research was finished before starting to design. The conclusion of the research formed guidelines that became the foundation in decision-making during the design process.

First I had to pick a site using the guidelines and experience at fieldwork. The P2 presentation forced me to come up with a masterplan within a week. This was based on the guidelines, but the masses were quite random, and it was not a success. The questioning of why I demolished the school that was originally on the site, was an eyeopener and a change in the right direction in my design process. I had to do a step back and really dig into the drawings of the existing building, but I belief this brought my project two steps forward after this was done.

During the process the feedback of the tutors was mainly guiding me on what to do next. My personal approach was always to work on all levels at the same time. When for example ventilation is added on the floorplan, this is directly visible in the section as well. This approach worked really well.

In this way it is directly clear what is possible and what not. And what the consequences were for construction, climate, exterior, interior, etc.

During the whole process the guidelines formed by my research were always in my mind. The focus was often on the technical part. The ‘care’ was still in mind, but I had to make this also visible. Product making was slow for me, it was hard to get a grip on such a big project sometimes. That was at the expense of more detailed elaboration. That is one thing I would like to improve.

It was helpful that the tutors asked me to focus on one specific points sometimes. This was done for the construction and the climate principle. In this way I was tested if it was really consistent through the building and if it was working. One thing that I surprised myself with was that I was not afraid to think out of the box, and even change some aspects almost at the end of the process to improve the architecture.

Presenting our work a few weeks before P4 to the Ministry of Internal affairs and for Habion, was really helpful. Even though it meant a stop from continuing the work, it was a nice way to test the concept and see what still had to be done. The output really helped with getting the concept clear, improving the story line, and making the design more realistic. For example they questioned what was done in case of fire, and they approached it from a financial perspective.

The design process has almost come to an end now. For P4 all products and elements should be there. Between P4 and P5 I will work on visualizing the atmosphere in the building and I will make a physical model. The design of the surroundings was part of research but put aside for a big time of the design process, this can be elaborated further as well.

I think this project really adds to society. The human approach combined with the scientific gives a clear overview of what architecture can do to improve the quality of life for this target group. Since statistics say 1 in 5 people will develop dementia, it is worth taking this target group into account when designing for elderly. I belief the guidelines are easily usable and applicable in existing as well as new buildings. It is my ambition that these design guidelines, as formed by the research, one day become a toolkit in designing for elderly, to make a building not just wheelchair-, but also dementia-proof.