GRADUATION REFLECTION REPORT

MSc Architecture | TU Delft 2023/2024
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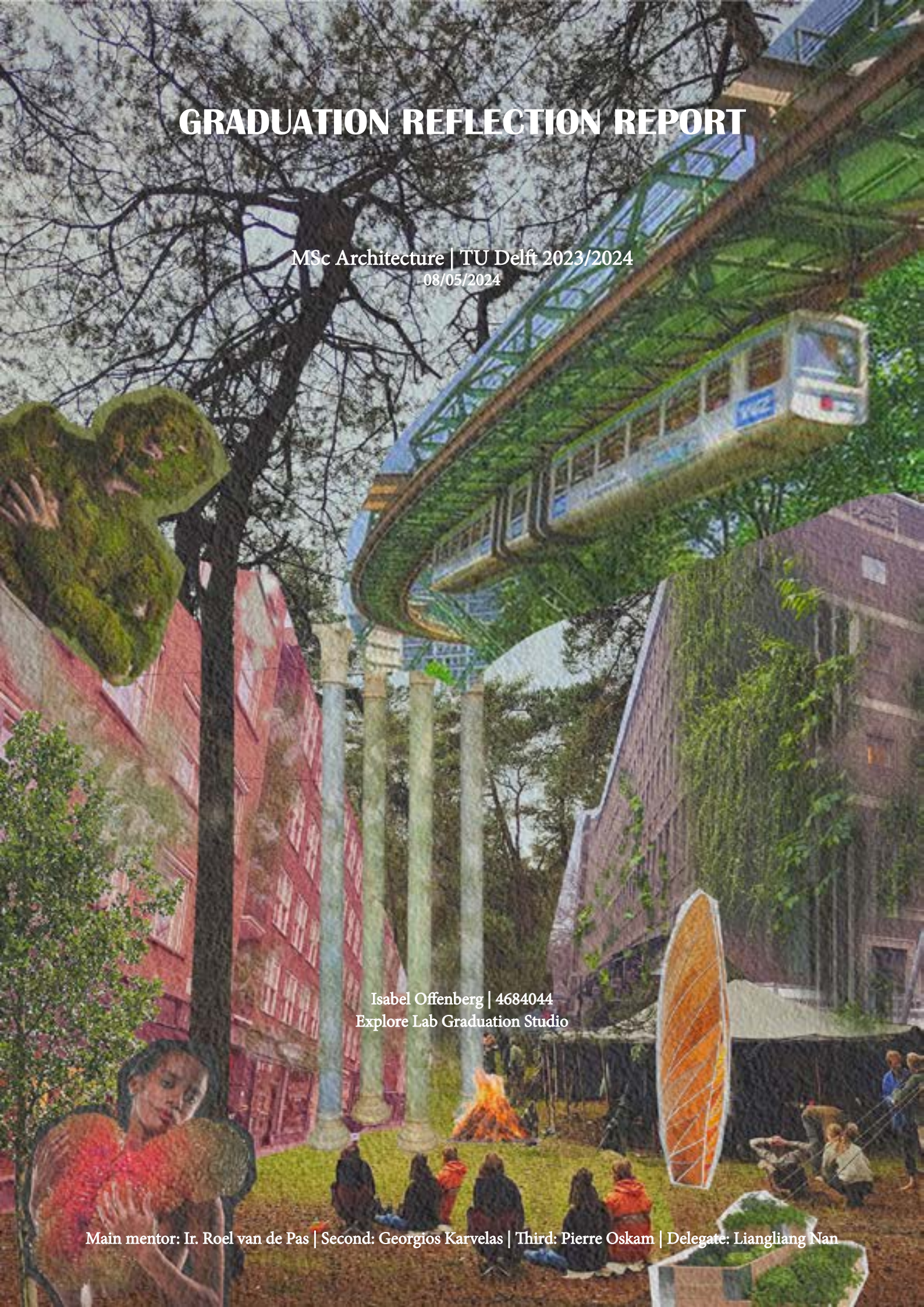

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Introduction

The project 'Enter the Symbiocene' focuses on renovating a post-war apartment building in Rotterdam's Meent district to change how people view their living environment. Meent is known for its lively atmosphere, bustling shopping scene, and fast-paced lifestyle, often leaving little space for nature. The current apartment building reflects an Anthropocenic mindset, keeping residents shielded from their surroundings. However, the renovation aims to promote a Symbiocenic attitude by fostering more-than-human relationships. This means encouraging residents to connect with nature and embrace their interconnectedness with the environment.

This project challenges the prevailing Anthropocentric view by recognizing the importance of non-human elements in urban life. The term “more-than-human” is critically used to remind human geographers that the non-human world not only exists, but has causal powers and capacities of its own. The “more-than-human relationship” is an overarching concept that elaborates on multiple relationships between humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans.

Through this project, I aim to reshape attitudes towards urban living and promote a harmonious coexistence with nature. To enter the Symbiocene.

Topic, track, and program alignment

What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (A, U, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

My graduation project, "Enter the Symbiocene," showcases the practical collaboration between architecture, landscape architecture, and building technology. It's a reflection of my journey through the MSc AUBS at TU Delft, where I've learned how integrating these disciplines can lead to sustainable urban environments. This interdisciplinary ethos is reflected in my project, where I've drawn on insights from architecture, landscape architecture, and building technology to create a comprehensive design solution.

Throughout my master's program, I've worked with professionals from different tracks: A, BT, and LA learning from their expertise while applying my architectural knowledge. This collaborative experience has been enriching, allowing me to explore innovative solutions and expand my understanding of design practices. In addition, my graduation project encompassed a renovation, a scaffolding structure highlighting temporality, and a new build part constructed from repurposed materials. These three approaches are relatively uncommon in architectural projects. Working with renovation, temporal structures, and repurposed materials provided me with a deeper understanding of architecture's role within the built environment. It allowed me to explore innovative aspects of architecture, aligning with the principles instilled in me by TU Delft.

In my project, the architect acts as a mediator, bringing together all the essential components to achieve a comprehensive design solution. It's been a challenging yet fulfilling role, requiring me to balance various perspectives and priorities.
Overall, my graduation project represents practical collaboration and a commitment to creating sustainable urban spaces.

Research impacts design, and vice versa

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

The research question, "How could design play a role in facilitating more-than-human relationships in pathways towards a Symbiocene environment?" led to the creation of a Manifesto. This Manifesto

addressed various sub-questions, such as the thoughts of posthumanism, the vision required to sustain humanity and co-species, and the specific more-than-human relationships present in a Symbiocene environment. It also explored how design could operationalize this vision in the Symbiocene world.

The Manifesto encourages designers to activate eight more-than-human relationships by incorporating ten design principles into their projects for Earth's inhabitants. The goal is to stimulate a Symbiocenic attitude, especially among humans. These principles emphasized giving space for more-than-human agency, dissolving boundaries, incorporating non-human scales, using concerted sourced materials, triggering the senses, celebrating Gaia, reintroducing environmental knowledge, familiarizing with more-than-humans, acknowledging shelter as a fluid necessity, and showing the sequel.
The research findings influenced the design by providing pre-set relationships and design principles. These principles helped activate the relationships and encouraged critical reflection on contemporary design approaches. The post-war apartment buildings served as examples of an Anthropocenic mindset, focusing solely on human shelter and logistical efficiency, with superficial human interactions and harsh indoor-outdoor boundaries.

However, while the design principles offered a base, they didn't specify materials, spaces, objects, or proximity between humans and non-humans. This led to new questions about renovating anthropogenic buildings with a symbiotic attitude and determining the extent of structural changes needed. During the design phase, considerations about human learning processes and the occurrence of multiple relationships simultaneously arose. Design became about creating spaces and conditions for interactions and activities to occur. Conducting this research through design allowed me to acquire a deeper understanding of the specific requirements and constraints of my graduation project.

Overall, while the Manifesto provided a general approach, more structured framework conditions during the design phase would have been beneficial. Nonetheless, the process led to discoveries about where and how relationships could best manifest in design, emphasizing the importance of considering both human and non-human needs and capacities.

The value of my approach
How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

The lack of a framework of conditions after the research was challenging. After the manifesto, the idea was to test materials, scales, boundaries, and programs. I wanted to have a structured testing schedule, but I couldn't start without a framework of demands. It became too big to tackle. Additionally, at first, I wanted to pursue activity-based design, but to make the project more compact, I looked at current rooms as functions in the current building and renovated those spaces.
This led to a period of six weeks of wondering, sketching, and reading about these questions, while not knowing if I was going to only use the current building, do an extension, or a whole separate building and leave the current building to decay. For how many people and what demographic?

By gaining information about the vision of the urban area of Rotterdam, that people should live smaller and that co-housing is rising, that temporality is always in play, and integrating zones for smooth transitions where different conditions and proximities apply, I got some grip by narrowing my design project. Additionally, the teachers reminded me that I had to make faster decisions because I was seeing too many opportunities. This all created space for a problem-solving mindset. On top of that the decision to keep the human shelter spaces orthogonally shaped, helped me focus on a specific design language, whilst the orthogonal shape does not disturb the non-human activity. Arguing that the non-human can find their way in orthogonal spaces, while the objects for non-humans should be more focused on creating conditions for the non-humans to thrive.

I tried different ways to stimulate my creative mindset. The best method that helped was making small clay models with leftover materials and reflecting on them. It also helped to find references. Furthermore, discussing the project with others helped me find my voice better, as I am an intuitive designer. The best insight happened when I was relaxing in the weekend; that's when the whole idea came together.
So, a structured process isn't conducive to my creative process. I have to test different ways of stimulating creativity. After that, I need to relax to process so that ideas will arise. However, sometimes I had to force my mindset into it. I'm happy that I discovered my way of working and need to lean into it more.

Initially, I was always sure that the idea would come and my motor would start producing. However, my teachers, not knowing me yet, were sometimes hesitant about my wandering. They encouraged me to start by drawing floorplans, even if they weren't perfect, emphasizing the importance of beginning the design process without complete ideas and learning as I progressed. Additionally, they introduced me to a more pragmatic approach to help external parties better understand my project. This involved outlining the steps I took throughout the project and demonstrating how these steps contributed to achieving the project's goals. This helped me to push myself in a certain direction to start the general idea and then go into decision mode.

In future projects, I understand my process better, and it should involve forcing myself by making sketches, discussing, and testing different things by hand, and with a balance of relaxing and daydreaming.

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

My graduation project presents a significant challenge to both academic and societal values. Academically, it delves into the intersection between common knowledge about natural processes and draws upon philosophical literature, biology, and proven technologies. This interdisciplinary approach strengthens the academic value of the project, as it allows for testing and argumentation from various perspectives.
In terms of societal value, the project focuses on the integration of cohousing among humans and cohabitation with non-human entities. It explores interactions between individuals and communities, as well as the role of solitude. Furthermore, it challenges the prevailing notion of human superiority over nature by emphasizing our interconnectedness with the natural world. Through this exploration, ethical questions arise regarding humanity's responsibilities towards nature and the broader ecosystem.

From a building technology and social perspective, I remember one of my tutors advising me that if you remove something from your building, the value of that removed part should exceed its value if it remained. This guidance shifted my approach to assessing the building's worth, reframing it not as a flaw but as an opportunity. It emphasized the importance of considering the value of each component and its impact on the overall design. Additionally, it highlighted the significance of using human logic responsibly, ensuring that our actions do not exploit or misuse nature.

Overall, my project prompts critical reflection on the ethical implications of human actions on nature. It underscores the importance of considering the broader impact of our decisions and emphasizes the need for a more holistic approach to coexistence with the environment.

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

At the beginning of my project, I recognized the significance of the subject matter for society, which calls for a shift towards sustainable living practices. I was looking for a medium that could spread my perspective on the crucial role of design in shaping human behavior towards sustainability, I opted for a manifesto. Manifestos are easily digestible and recognizable, making them accessible for individuals to grasp and resonate with.

The transferability of my design results holds significant value due to its adaptability to common typologies in the Netherlands. While the size of the projects addresses a familiar typology, certain elements can be applied to similar typologies, connecting them and greening the city. However, variations in building orientation affect factors such as daylight and sun position, leading to diverse programming demands and the emergence of different biotopes in various locations. This variability makes each project unique and contributes to a more resilient natural environment.
Furthermore, while the results may differ, they represent one of many possible solutions that incorporate both research and design principles. Additionally, the project serves cohousing more privately, adding another layer of value.
In essence, if more individuals aspire to live in urban areas with increased access to nature, embracing cohousing and smaller living spaces becomes crucial. This approach fosters a sense of shared living and reduces the need for additional buildings, aligning with the broader goal of sustainable urban development.

Self-formulated reflection inquiry

Reflection Question 1: *How can we as individuals and as a society shift our mindset from Anthropocentrism to Symbiocentrism in urban environments like Rotterdam's Meent district, and what specific actions can be taken to foster a deeper connection with nature in our daily lives?*

To transition from Anthropocentrism to Symbiocentrism in urban settings like Rotterdam's Meent district, individuals and society can embark on a journey of deeper connection with nature in their daily lives. This shift can be facilitated by embracing the principles outlined in the Manifesto, which advocates for eight "more-than-human" relationships with our natural surroundings: Celebrate, master, connect, concert, shelter, recede, make, and familiarize.
These relationships can manifest through intentional design elements that prioritize proximity to nature. For instance, residential areas can incorporate spaces where humans and non-humans coexist harmoniously, allowing nature to benefit from human presence while also providing areas where it can thrive independently. This integration should be seamlessly woven into the built environment, creating environments where interaction with nature is not merely a choice but an inherent aspect of daily life.

Designing spaces that accommodate various weather conditions can enhance sensory experiences for humans, fostering a deeper connection with the environment. Additionally, promoting sustainable practices such as recycling and waste reduction in urban design further reinforces this symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. Integrating technology into our exploration of nature can deepen our understanding and appreciation of it. By using technology as a tool for interaction, collaboration, and education, we can enhance our connection with the natural world. It's crucial, however, to employ technology ethically, ensuring that our relationship with it fosters greater knowledge and ethical conduct in our interactions with nature. Familiarizing technology enables us to grasp ethical codes more effectively.

By actively engaging with nature in their surroundings, individuals can gradually realize their interconnectedness with the environment and adopt a Symbiocentric approach to urban living. This

mindset shift not only enhances the quality of life for residents but also contributes to the preservation and flourishing of urban ecosystems where humans and non-humans thrive together.

Reflection Question 2: *Reflecting on the objectives of the 'Enter the Symbiocene' project, how might fostering more-than-human relationships within urban environments contribute to the overall resilience and adaptability of cities in the face of ongoing environmental challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss?*

The project aims to establish the eight relationships to be proportional and can adapt to varying circumstances. In times of necessity, such as an increased need for shelter, resources should be allocated accordingly. Conversely, during periods of stability, we can allocate space for non-human entities, allowing them to coexist within urban environments, leading to connect and concert with the living environment. Furthermore, cities often contain non-biodegradable materials, presenting an ethical dilemma regarding their disposal. By repurposing these materials, we offer nature the opportunity to rejuvenate Anthropocene artifacts, potentially ensuring the survival of existing ecosystems even in the absence of human presence. The opening up of the construction of the contemporary building, utilizing repurposed materials in an adaptable scaffold structure, enables flexibility to accommodate different scenarios such as climate change. Within this framework, nature can thrive autonomously, or humans can intervene through designing organic interventions for non-humans.

Conclusion

In concluding this reflection, I must acknowledge the significant lessons I've gained regarding humanity's stance on climate change and the ethical dilemmas surrounding biodiversity loss and survival. It's become clear to me that combating the growing misanthropy within our society involves recognizing humans as integral components of the larger Gaia system, fostering a sense of responsibility and deeper connection in our daily lives.

During the design phase, I realized the profound impact design can have on human behavior and consciousness. While my focus initially leaned towards spatial considerations and temporal cycles, I'm now eager to delve into the complexity of smaller objects and scales that can provide habitat for non-human entities. My project primarily centered on adapting human spaces to facilitate interaction with non-humans and creating conducive environments for their existence by providing essential elements like soil, water, daylight, and wind.
However, I'm eager to explore how design can contribute to create better habitats for non-humans in the urban environment. For example, by testing materials, shapes, conditions and scales. Additionally, I aim to further explore the proximity between humans and non-humans, aiming to dismantle the cultural divide between people and nature and strengthen the relationships that should naturally occur.

As a beginner in this field, I recognize that there is still much to learn. The knowledge in this area is vast and requires the collaboration of numerous specialists to truly elevate it. Taking this initial step has been enlightening, yet I'm aware that there's a long journey ahead. Nonetheless, one thing remains clear: we cannot thrive without nature. While we've often prioritized our own needs, it's imperative that we now prioritize the well-being of our environment.

Thank you.

I chose to organize my thoughts in this structure, but I kept the graduation manual aim and request in mind as I wrote, making sure to answer them all well.