Reflection on the Graduation Process of Nadja Znamenskaya

1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (Ar, Ur, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

Throughout both my bachelor and master tracks, dwellings have always peaked my interest, because we humans have a deep emotional relationship with our homes. Our homes have a lot of impact on our daily lives and so I have decided to conclude my studies by focusing on health and wellbeing of future inhabitants. That is why for my graduation I have chosen the Dwelling Studio: Designing for Health and Care. Within the studio I have decided to focus on the topic of Mental Health Promoting Senior Living Environments, since seniors are an especially vulnerable group and they are more likely to spend more time at home than other demographics, who go outdoors for work or education.

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

Seniors are a growing demographic. Therefore the question of senior (mental) health becomes ever more relevant, as our health institutions struggle to provide care for this group. Therefore (mental) health promotion and prevention of diseases should become a priority for all human-centered disciplines. Architects in particular can play an important role here, since many contemporary senior living environments are notorious for being depressing and uninspiring. Therefore there is an opportunity to improve these environments, so they contribute to the wellbeing of its inhabitants.

I have decided to focus specifically on mental health, since Late Life Depression is very common among seniors. In addition it causes various somatic comorbidities, which prove near impossible to cure, unless the underlying depression is addressed.

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

I have started my research process by formulating the following research question: "Which architectural factors contribute to the prevention or alleviation of late life depression in senior living environments?"

In order to answer this question, I have done literature studies of Late Life Depression and Evidence Based Design. In addition I have done fieldwork at a retirement home and I have interviewed two geriatric specialists (a nurse and a psychologist). These methods have provided me with a list of design factors that can influence mental health. In order to find out how these factors can be implemented, I have performed case studies of both psychiatric hospitals and senior living environments.

The literature study, fieldwork and interviews proved to be very useful to gather various perspectives on the topic of mental health promotion and to formulate a list of design factors. However the case studies could have been done more effectively; rather than simply analyzing state of the art facilities, it would have been wiser to zoom into each factor individually and find multiple implementation examples in different typologies.

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

The results of my research indicated that there are eighteen potential factors that might contribute to the prevention or alleviation of late life depression in senior living environments. Of these factors the most important ones are Nature, Social Interactions, Accessibility, Morning Light, and Physical Activity.

However having these guiding themes proved to be insufficient, since it lacked the implementation into architectural design decisions. Even though I had thoroughly analyzed seven case studies, I initially didn't have a list of implementation techniques that I could apply in my own design. And so rather than using optimal architectural solutions against depression as a starting point, I designed a mass, which answered the site requirements, which I then needed to adjust to meet my research goal. Similarly my choice for both site and plot is insufficiently based in research. Rather than choosing a plot which would be optimal for depression prevention, I chose the most depressing plot, where I could apply the research factors to mitigate the negative environmental factors. As a result, I gave myself the very challenging task of trying to uplift one of the most depressing parts of Laak, rather than designing a state-of-the-art project, showcasing the findings of my research. This fallacy in my thinking process has resulted in a difficult design process and has prevented me from truly understanding and integrating the feedback of my design mentor.

However after having this realization during P3, I had time to course-correct my actions. I have thoroughly considered each design factor, looked for numerous references and created architectural mood-boards to get a better grip on design implementations. I have not included these findings into the final research due to time restrictions, but it has proven very useful in the last stages of my design.

As a result I have a large-scaled but friendly and accessible building, with plenty of daylight and nature. The design fosters spontaneous social interactions and invites people to walk through and around the building.

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

Despite the fact that my research lacks an elaborate list of implementation techniques, it could still be useful for architects, who are tasked with designing senior living environments. The research provides a thorough insight into why the design factors affect the mental health of the users, which can strengthen the rationale of an architect during negotiations with stakeholders.

In terms of design, the location surprisingly helps design transferability. There are many locations in the Netherlands which are similar to Laak, with identical 15- and 9- story gallery flats from the '70s, housing mostly low-income communities. In that sense my project results can be used as a reference in terms of how to uplift these neighborhoods.

6. Additional question. If you could do your project again, what would you do differently?

If I could do my research again, I would pay more attention to architectural implementations. Besides finding references for each design factor, I would include my own sketches of possible architectural solutions.

If I could do my design again, I would choose a location that is a result of my research findings: so a central, but less noisy and more pedestrian-friendly environment. In addition I would choose a location that would allow me create a smaller building. The large scale of my project has added a lot complexity, which is unrelated to my research topic.