REFLECTION

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This reflection takes a critical look at the research and design process during my graduation project in the studio 'Dwelling: Designing for Care in an Inclusive Environment'. The reflection is divided into two parts 'process & approach' and 'outcome of research and design'. The first part reflects on the process, both on a methodological level as well as a personal level. In the second part of the reflection the results of my research and design process are reflected on, with regard to their academic and social value, as well as the transferability of the project. In both parts of this reflection, three questions are answered to gain insight into this.

PROCESS & APPROACH

1.1 How do you assess the value of your way of working ?

This studio started with a strong focus on research, making a well-founded choice for a target group, and formulating a strong main question. The research methods I used in this orienting period were mainly literature study and case studies. The choice for my research topic arose from my personal interest in the target group as well as from inspiration from an existing care concept that owes its quality to its architectural features: the farm-based care typology. This resulted in the following research question:

'Can the successful characteristics of farm-based day care be implemented in the green-blue landscape of Dutch cities in order to support the spatial and architectural needs of people with early-stage dementia?'

After the formation of my research question, the focus has mainly been on literature research, case studies research as well as fieldwork, which was an important element in this studio. Shortly after this, I started my design process, focusing on a preliminary design concept, while research was still in progress. Research and design therefore coincided on many moments.

My personal design process always starts very broad in the beginning of a course, I try out different methods and approaches. Think of sketches, digital models, physical models, reference studies, etc. The primary reason for this is that the different designing methods help me gradually construct a guiding theme, that gets more and more specific over time which offers me support. However, what was different during this graduation project ,was that I found it much more difficult to find this specific direction. This was partly due to the pressure I put on myself because this is my graduation work combined with a fear of failure, but also because we were given a lot of freedom in the process. This caused me to be in a chaotic work approach for a long time and lost sight of my design goal. As a result of this I was stuck in the design process for a number of weeks, working on it every day, but without a clear goal. Looking at this critically, I should have forced myself to create a strong guiding theme for my project from the beginning to offer me more guidance rather than waiting for things to happen naturally.

Luckily I came out of this design block mainly due to the alternation of research and design, which will be discussed in depth in section 1.3 of this reflection. Another method that seemed to really work for me was to work together with some of my peers or talking to my academic counselor. I was able to develop a clearer guiding theme by exchanging thoughts with people and attempting to convey my concept to them. In my opinion, I ought to have taken this action sooner rather than isolating myself from other people out of stress. Changing my approach during the tutorings helped me as well. In the beginning of the design process I struggled with the weekly tutorings as I was anxious to present my work because I was running behind. I was able to more effectively tailor my tutorings to my personal needs and maximize my gain from them as soon as I began to really prepare by concentrating on the questions I wanted to ask rather than just showcasing my design. My teachers' input got increasingly focused on as a result, and I believe that this has really helped me.

Another thing that helped me in the later stages of my process was setting deadlines for myself, which kind of forced myself to make choices, as I noticed that I felt too free and insecure in the beginning. After this, my way of working switched to a much more orderly method, different design methods (sketching, making digital and physical models, looking at references etc.) still alternated, but this time much more with a goal and ordered. This also made me feel a lot better mentally and I therefore think it is a pity that I didn't come to this approach earlier.

In short, talking to peers, the academic counselor and my tutors and creating structure for myself often resulted in taking a step back, reflecting on my research results and going back to the core of my concept which made me use design methods with more structure. As a result, I was able to have more control over my design process.

1.2 How do you assess the value of your personal progress and growth?

During the course of this graduation project, I faced a number of personal challenges that even which provided me with numerous opportunities for personal improvement.

The first half of this course went well for me; I found the research to be a very interesting and inspiring element of this graduation studio. After an extensive search for a suitable topic, the research process went rather smoothly. Often, once I have a well-thought-out plan or concept where I feel confident about, the rest of my process is often very structured and productive. However, as I mentioned earlier, as the design phase began, my process changed. Translating my research in to a design was the most challenging part for me.

For me, designing is a very personal process that responds to my emotions. I always want to improve myself and get the best out of myself, however, the level of perfection I strive for is sometimes not achievable due to the scope of the assignment. When I noticed that I was unable to achieve these high ambitions, this resulted in the feeling of insecurity and failure which negatively affected my mental health at times. Throughout the research and design stages, I became aware of how frequently I allowed these negative emotions to rule my decisions, which occasionally affected my time management as well as my organizational abilities. For example, my perfectionistic mindset made me strive for a 'perfect' design concept which cost me a lot of time. This made me linger too long in my conceptual design phase, posing a significant challenge as I struggled keeping up with the many tasks that needed to be done and managing my time well.

This ultimately led to me presenting something during my first P4 that I was not happy with, it was not finished, and in my opinion not thought through enough. I then chose to try my p4 again in September 2023. At first this felt like failure to me, I needed some time to process this. However, this turned out to be the best choice for me because I now had time to complete my design to my satisfaction under less pressure.

Making the choice to do my P4 again at a later time is, I think, the biggest growth I have made in a long time. Due to my fear of failure, this was an extremely difficult choice, but it has shown me that I can do things at my own pace and that 'failure' does not mean the end of the world. Next to this, some other things I did lead to personal growth. For example, I have tried to compare myself less with others, because everyone has their own process. I also focused on my progress on products, instead of aiming for perfection. The concept of 'iterative design' really helped me. This focusses on working towards a draft level of every product and then evaluating and refining it alternately, instead of finishing every product fully one by one. Finally, I've tried to focus less on the deadlines for the presentations to create some peace in my head.

These mental challenges have made the design process difficult and exhausting, however I think the steps I have taken have contributed to my growth as a designer.

1.3 How did your research influence your design and how did the design influence your research?

In the beginning of my design process, the qualities of farm-based care, explored in this research, where leading in the formation of my early concept. Visiting and researching different farm-based day care locations during the fieldwork period, gave me a spatial image of the theory I read and provided me with inspiration for my design. However, this unconsciously caused the urban context to fade into the background in my design process. As a result, when I started designing, my focus was too much on rurality and small scale design. While reflecting on this after the P2, this made me dissatisfied with my design. My goal was to design an urban variant of a day care farm, however I lost sight of this overarching goal a bit. While reflecting critically on the created primarily architectural masses, it turned out that there was more focus needed on the urban environment.

This was a clear moment when my design process guided and enhanced my research. I took a step back and delved into the literature again, but this time with a focus on dementia in the city, and not only in the effects of farms. Extra fieldwork at a day care facility in the city of the Hague, helped me to form a better image of what is needed in the city, but also what the city has to offer for people with dementia. My improved research and extra fieldwork ensured that I got inspiration for my design again, which again shows that my research supported me in my design process.

This cycle of becoming stuck in the design, developing and refining my research, and therefore being able to design again has maintained through my process and has been really beneficial to me. This interaction between research and design has allowed me to come closer and closer to my guiding theme, something that I sometimes lost track of during my process but mastered during my second try for my P4.

OUTCOME OF RESEARCH AND DESIGN

2.1 What is the relation between your graduation project, your master studio, master track, and your master program?

The graduation studio I have participated in, focusses on creating a safe, supportive and healthy living environment for target groups that are generally forgotten in the design of dwellings, public buildings or urban structures.

My graduation project topic focuses on improving the quality of life of people with early stage dementia, as well as reliving the stress of their informal caregivers, using architecture. In order to reach this goal, the outcome of my research on the qualities the farm-based care typology have been translated into a design of an urban dementia day care facility. In this design, people with early stage dementia are literally made part of the city by placing the day care function in a non-institutional residential building with public spaces. The different target groups that come together here are connected through different activity spaces, including greenhouses that are integrated in the building. This makes sure that people with dementia create a connection with other people, with themselves and with nature in a safe way. The shape of the building takes inspiration from a farmyard, by dividing the functions in the building and distributing them across the site to create a small scale and a level of playfulness. On the other hand, the building fits within the urban environment due to the shape, façade materials and urban function. As the topic of my research and the design that resulted from this, revolve around creating an inclusive and supportive environment for my target group while keeping them active members of society and relieving their loved ones, this theme fits in well within the goal of my graduation studio.

On a wider scale, these study and design also strongly align with the master's track Architecture and the master's program that I attended. My research focusses on the influence of the architectural and spatial characteristics of care farms on people with early stage dementia, as this typology has a proven positive effect on this target group. Because this typology is no yet specifically present in the urban fabric of Dutch cities concept, generic guidelines are needed to make this possible. The core of this research has been to extract qualities from rurality to make it spatial and generic for the city, this has been a translation based on architecture. For example, how do you implement the small scale atmosphere of a farm and the connection with nature of a farm in a city? These are mainly architectural challenges that is closely related to the master track and the master's program.

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

The growing number of dementia patients is something our society will increasingly be confronted with. In combination with the growing shortage of healthcare workers and the pressure on healthcare in general, this problem will grow, both within healthcare itself and for architects. A change in Dutch healthcare has to occur to cope with the effects of an aging society, which will automatically lead to a demand for change in the built environment. My research can serve as support for this need for change by learning from anthropological research and by extracting qualities from a successful farm-based concept. As my research involves observations and experiences in real-life situations and living environments with regard to the target group, it is a new addition to the theory that already exists on the subject of dementia in relation to the built environment. Fieldwork is therefore something that I think was really valuable in my process, as it offered me an emotional and 'human' layer to my design and research. This fieldwork was done in an ethical way as it has created objective results based on observations where the interaction between target group with their environment has been respectfully analyzed, without interviewing this vulnerable group. For these reasons, this research, as well as the guidelines that followed from it can be relevant to a larger social, professional and scientific framework in an innovative and ethical way.

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

My research has resulted in a number of general guidelines that can be used during the design of a dementia day care facility with the positive characteristics of the existing concept of day care farms. Because these guidelines are generic, go from general to specific and offer recommendations, they can be applied at different scale levels and different locations, both rural and non-rural. In my own final design, I show a way in which these guidelines can be applied in an urban fabric. However, other designers can use the same guidelines and apply this in their own way on their own design location. For example, in my design, I combine the day care function in a residential building and connect the functions through an urban farming component: the rooftop greenhouse. In this way I strengthen the connection with the environment and limit the institutional atmosphere and connect the user with nature, which is important within farm-based care. Another designer can do this in the same way, but can also translate the guidelines in a different way.

As dementia is a growing problem in our society, innovative concepts and designs such as this are in demand. It is therefore very valuable that these research results can be adopted by other designers by the use of widely applicable guidelines.