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Graduation Studio: Explore Lab

Introduction

The main goal of this reflection is to give a short, substantiated explanation to account for the results of the research and design in the graduation phase of the Explore Lab studio have been realised. The aim of this reflection is to obtain a better understanding of 'how' and 'why' the chosen approach did or did not work, and to what extent.

Reflection on method, process and planning

My graduation method consists of eight phases:

- The first phase is the initiation phase describing the fascination, relevance, and problem statement of my graduation project.
- The second phase is the preparation of the theoretical research phase. This phase consists of a literature scan and the formulation of the research question.
- The third phase is performing the theoretical research. This phase consists of a short introduction to the history of the fascination, the current state of the topic, and elaboration on the notions regarding the fascination providing a preliminary solution for the problem statement.
- The fourth phase is the preparation of the field research with background research to notational methods, existing researching techniques and preparation to the research.
- The fifth phase is performing the field research. This phase consists of site visits, observations, interviews and sorting.
- The sixth phase is the preparation for the design phase. The results and conclusions of the field research are written down in the research report and leads for design qualities are given. As well is location research being done as a first sketch design being made.
- The seventh phase is the design phase, starting with a concept based on the results of the research, a design brief, a preliminary design and a final design.
- The eighth phase is the reflection on the project.

Reflection

The first phase is the initiation phase. During this phase arises the initial reason of the necessity of the project. In the Explore Lab studio this is named the fascination. The main question is why this theme, why this project? I experienced this activity as very intense and I realised I really have a passion for the subject at hand. It also gave me a focus on the project: what is the project about and what not.

Rituals and rite fascinate me. I started noticing this a few years ago during visits to the Orthodox Church in Romania. The beauty lays for me in the way the performer deals with his emotion during the ritual. In this project, I could utilize my curiosity and explore and elaborate the possibilities of this fascination on the subject.

Uncontrolled emotions create stress. Stress can be reduced by rites. It made me aware that we have many rites in daily life. In this project, I brought these experiences to my professional field of knowledge. By means of exploring these intangible topics in the domain of architectural design and to present exemplary design.

The problem with rituals and emotions is that within the field of architecture there has been done a lot of research of the experience of architecture, e.g. the works of Pallasmaa, and the behaviour of people in cities and around buildings, e.g. the works of Whyte. There is however little knowledge about the intangibles related to (the parts of) buildings that invite to (daily) rituals. A building provides place for rituals and taking part in the rituals influences the emotions and the experience of the user. Rituals can be used to reduce stress. More research is needed to these intangibles since they can provide an optimisation of needs of the users in architecture. The Delft University Campus offers a very challenging case to test emotions and rites in the built environment, because of the work pressure that comes with an array of emotions. Assumed is that the users of the buildings have personalised rites to deal with these emotions. How can an architectural design be made in which rites and emotions are optimised?

During the second phase my research question arose. The combination of my fascination and the problem statement made two initial questions come to the front: 'how can place provide help for emotional change?' and 'what is the value of an understanding of rite for this?'. This resulted in the following research question: 'How can understanding of rite help to create place for stress reduction?'

The research question consists of several notions like rite, place and stress reduction that all needed to be researched during the third phase. A preliminary literature scan showed me that there was a feasible amount of literature available to come to general insight in the topics. I started with sorting out a large amount of definitions, on e.g. ritual, rite, ritual space, place, behaviour, emotion, stress and experience. This way of working provided a quick comprehension of the topics and is something I would certainly do once more.

The main problem with the notions is that there was little tested in practice. Therefore, I got the idea to do field research to see whether there were actually a lot of rituals with emotional change, specifically in daily life. The preparation for this research took relative a lot of time because I had to become acquainted with the field of work that are relatively new to me, e.g. social geography, cultural anthropology, environmental psychology and semiotics. This knowledge forms however a new base knowledge that for future projects is now acquired.

The phase of the field research was a lot of fun. Observing people and asking people to fill in a prepared questionnaire is something that suits me. During the two rounds of enquiries for the questionnaires a lot of people participated and the results were above expectations. Sorting out the results is something that cost a lot of time and is something that in the planning needs to be accounted for.

The process overall is a logical one following a structured order and the method is very well feasible during future projects. There were a lot of activities I performed for the first time. So

that was time consuming because I had to find out the way it worked. In future projects time can be saved.

Relationship between research and design

The Process

In phase 6 and 7 I had to translate the results from the research to a design. This was new for me. I think only after the design phase had started I got to realise that a strong concept is needed to make this translation. Translating the research into a design is something that has to be implemented step by step and it is good to get a lot of feedback from peers during this phase. It is an interactive process in which you go forward and backward all the time questioning yourself if this design answers to the findings in the research. There is a risk that you keep on questioning this instead of moving forward. So at some point in time you have to make a decision about the design. This decision you make partly at your gut feeling. The more you move on with the design you get more and more the feeling that 'it is good', that this is what you want to share with people with your design, what you want to offer people with your design. There is also always a part in the design that is due to the subjective creativity of the designer. It showed in the discussion with the tutors about the design, the materials used, the sphere created. Each had its own preferences and examples that they showed me and told me, trying to be helpful which I appreciated very much. But at some point in the designing process I made my own choices: this is what the design should be, concept, function, look and feel, etc. 'This is what it stands for', and it felt good. It had become my design. I felt passionate about it. I wanted to defend it.

The design

The field research gave some clear results and conclusions that led to the following starting points. Participants saw their visits to location as a ritual and there was a clear change of emotions. Also, the places and architectural elements where the emotional change happened were very distinctive. Emotions and rituals are therefore to be taken into account during designs and architectural processes. An optimisation of ritual spaces for stress reduction is needed at the Technical University Delft. I feel there is a necessity for a centre of retreat, with a pavilion like structure where temporal change can have long lasting effects. It should have a clear programme and be easily accessible. It should be a place and not just a space, preventive for stress. Natural elements should be used, enough plants, enough daylight for dealing with emotions in the proper way.

When designing there are two notions important to take into account. The imagine ability, how easy is it to form a mental image, visual representation? And the legibility, how easy is it to interpret, infer a meaning, significance, thought, intention? How do people perceive space? I think. Therefore, I translated the starting points in a clear concept that elaborated during the design phase. With constant referring back to the research I came to the following concept.

The centre for retreat is a complex that is situated in the Mekelpark of the Delft University Campus. The centre is visited by people to relax of their daily stress. The buildings and spaces of the centre invite to destress. There are four different buildings and an enclosed garden. The complex has two entrances. After entering provides the complex different

possibilities to destress at an individual level and individual pace. In the same time can a route be followed in which the intensity of the relaxation and self-reflection is enhanced. The complex provides the possibility for individual choices that becomes clear from the fact that the different buildings and spaces are separate accessible and in the same time can the path to deepening be followed. Every space has his own function, atmosphere that evokes in an architectural way to emotional change, destressing and relaxation. There is separation from society but not seclusion. One of the main architectural themes is inside-outside. People step out of their daily life for a brief or longer moment depending on the activity they choose to do in the pavilion. But they also step back into their daily life after finishing their activity. They do not enter a monastery, they want to destress but still be part of their daily life. So the design is not a monastery with thick walls and no windows. It is an open design in which you can enter and leave easily (inviting design) and there is a view on the outside world from every room, or part of the building yet simultaneously offering a feeling of separation.

At one hand forces the design in several places to ritual behaviour, like a hallway that becomes smaller or a path that goes up. At the other hand invites the design to create ones own rituals like in a corner of the solitary meditative pavilion, or by example performing a cleaning ritual at the washbasin.

Relationship between graduation project and wider social context

Stress is an important issue lately at the university. There have been recently published a lot of articles at the website of Delta about the tremendous amount of applications done at the psychologist department of Career & Counselling Services. Extra measures are being taken in order to deal with this increased amount of applications. A cause for this increased request of help can be found at the core of one of the most important ambitions of Technical University Delft, the university wishes to remain a technology university with a leading global reputation. Thus the Technical University of Delft strives for excellency. Inherently to excellency is the notion of stress.

In my regard should adequate means be provided in order to achieve 'personal optimisation' or excellency. This means that there should be a place where one can destress. This could be the Centre of Retreat that is free accessible and open 24/7.