Reflection

The relationship between research and design

In this project, the research defines what the actual project is about. I started my graduation project with a fascination for the future of informal learning spaces; public spaces in the city that offer a learning potential, in contrast with the formal way of learning we are used to in schools and institutes. During the exploration of this topic, it became clear that it was very well connected with an actual topic in Rotterdam: the extension of school hours for many primary schools in Rotterdam Zuid. The schools need to fill in those hours themselves, in combination with sports-, cultural or other institutions, with a focus on a wider development of the children. This raises a question that is very similar to mine: how do we spend those hours learning, when not necessarily inside a school, and how can we use the city network in this? One of the neighbourhoods that has to deal with this, is Tarwewijk; a place full of people that actively want to create a better neighbourhood, but that is very much overlooked by the developments of the cultural network. Inevitably, the research needed to cover three topics: the learning space, the cultural network of the city and the actual physical and social environment the children grow up in: Tarwewijk.

The research of this project should be seen as a very broad exploration of those three different contexts, leading to the program for the design phase. In this sense, the research is very much about finding those programmatic needs, not necessarily about solving them. That is where the design itself comes in; the program is translated into design goals. Those design goals are researched through design on the three different scale levels: the urban scale, the location specific scale and the building scale. The defined design goals form a general advice for the different contexts, the design itself can be seen as an exploration of how these goals could get a spatial configuration, placed between the specificity of the place and the autonomy of the program.

The research was needed to slowly shape the actual assignment, making it not completely clear from the beginning what the goal of the project would be, or what I would design in the end. Informal learning spaces reach from libraries and museums to park and public squares. Without an extensive analysis of the different contexts, it was not possible to define a realistic design assignment. The three contexts being completely different in scale and focus, made this more complex: how to bring them together in the design was a research assignment on its own. This also meant that the research was never completely finished: shifting between topics and scales was needed throughout the whole process to come to the architectural expression of the program.

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The relationship between graduation topic, the studio topic, the master track and the master program

The relationship between my graduation topic, the studio topic and the master in general is about the relationship between architect – design – user. Both in the research, throughout the design process and in the design itself one question was always present: what is the responsibility that I want to take as a designer? This was mainly influenced by the difference between the studio topic, and the topics we are used to work with as architecture students.

The starting point of my graduation project is to create equal opportunities for the youth of Tarwewijk, by engaging them in the learning process and giving them a voice in this. How can you create an environment in which someone can shape his or her own learning process? Of course, this is not necessarily an architectural question; it is just as much a programmatic and social one, making the role of the designer more complex.

The architecture master track has mostly meant focussing on the material, spatial and technical aspects of the building design. The Veldacademie as a graduation studio has a different focus; creating projects that are close to the city's inhabitants, working with action-based methods to create an inclusive approach. Creating space for the opinion and influence of the resident is important in this. My main topic, engaging children through an architectural intervention, can be placed right in the middle of those two approaches. How do I create space through material, spatial and technical means, to voice the opinion of the youth in the neighbourhood? What should the influence of the future user be in my research and design process?

This created an ongoing demarcation of my position as an architect, or maybe even as a researcher in general: trying to define what the knowledge and skills I learned in this master program are worth against the opinion of the people in the neighbourhood, being not only the context of research, but also the experts.

The relation between myself as designer, the future users, the experts and the design is expressing how my graduation topic, the studio and the study program in general relate to each other. This made my graduation project not only a process towards a final design, but also a process towards my point of view as a future architect. It made me extremely conscious about the meaning of all the decisions I took, sometimes making it hard to take any decisions at all. This is without doubt the part that created the greatest uncertainties during the process, as it was something I never put that much thought in before starting my project at the Veldacademie, but in the end it is also the part that I value most in the results of my own project.

Elaboration on research method and approach

In the Veldacademie studio, the way of research, work and design is very open, making it very hard in the beginning to define a specific research set-up. The search for a relevant topic related to the socio-spatial context of Rotterdam, the starting point of the studio, was quite straightforward, as my personal fascination of informal learning spaces as part of the urban structure relates to many current issues both in Rotterdam as well as urban environments in general.

Connecting this fascination to a present issue in Rotterdam made it easier to make the research more specific in terms of target group and location, while at the same time more difficult: to combine the theoretical with the practical brought a need for many information sources to deal with. Although I started my project with great enthusiasm, it became clear quite early that the type of research necessary for my project was something I had never done before. Therefore, it was of great help to work at the Veldacademie, handing me the necessary tools and examples to structure the research, and step by step frame the project more precisely.

For every of the three research contexts, an objective and subjective view are combined. Tools as observations, street interviews, and (mental) mapping give a validation for the conclusions from the desk research. Expert meetings give a different kind of observation: the observation of someone present in the neighbourhood every day. I learned a lot from this way of working and got a good understanding of my assignment, but it also meant that during the research I had to adjust my proposed method several times. In this type of research, it is hard to predict what the outcome will be, especially with children as a target group. A good example of this is my proposal to use first street interviews and observations to create a concept design, which then could be tested with the children. In that way, they would also benefit, as they would have a valuable workshop about their influence on their context. But already during the street interviews, it became clear that for children it is very hard to think about their spatial surrounding, as for them the spatial and social surrounding are one. A workshop to test my concept, would therefor only be beneficial to myself. To make the children part of this, a whole program of workshops would be necessary, something that does not fit in a graduation year. However, this was one of the priorities of my project and is still something that I find very important. So instead of integrating this in my personal research, it got a place in the design: part of the building is designed as a research lab for the children, to express their opinion about their context through different media. In this way, the use of the building becomes a research on its own.

Opposed to this location related research, I conducted a typological research. The school as learning environment is a very specific type of architecture and studying the changes in this typology, together with changes in society, gives a clear understanding of what a future learning space will need. The current need

for a new school system in Tarwewijk can only be validated with an understanding of how the architecture of learning environments will shape the way of learning in the future.

All types of research support each other in the validation of the final design. They started as separate elements on different scales, hard to directly translate to a design. They were more like a mental library to start the design stage with, and sometimes even felt like restrictions: the focus of the research had been so much on making a realistic project that the space for creativity sometimes seemed lost. It took time to become conscious about the relation between those elements and to find solutions that would actually use the restrictions in a positive way; only during the design phase the meaning of the various research elements would therefore become completely clear.

Because of this, I believe that the design phase itself should be seen as a part of the research, more than as a proof of it. In the design phase, many small, very specific researches were conducted through sketches, model studies, collages etc. Every one of them on a different scale and with a different focus, with the main goal to nót think too much about all contexts at once, and it that way create the opportunity to reflect critically. My tutors have been a great help in this, sending me in a completely new direction every time a decision was made, making the project more complex but at the same time creating the possibility to make it more specific. Sometimes this made the process seem chaotic, switching between topics and scales quite fast, but it truly helped in finding out exactly where there was room between the restrictions to combine the different research elements.

The relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework

As found in the research, the search for a new architectural expression for learning environments is an ongoing process, changing as fast as society does. Looking into the future, this will still be a question. Digitalization of learning and communication eliminates the need for a physical, classroom bound learning experience. At the same time, specific values like social interaction and informal exchange are not as easy to accommodate online, something we can only confirm through the situation we are currently going through. This means we have to find new ways to accommodate both.

Interestingly, we can see in the history of school typologies that architectural expression has not necessarily only been accommodating the changing needs of society, but has been pointing them out, steering the way we think about learning in new directions. Designing future learning typologies can help guiding through this digital transition, without overlooking the values of the physical interaction.

This change is inevitable, meaning that rethinking the spatial elements of a school as learning space is also a predictable future for the architectural profession. This is not anymore only about rethinking the size of a classroom or the amount of light and air, it is because of this digitalization about a whole new way of using our context. We are still very much bound to our closed classrooms, to our teaching system, to our thinking of children in test results and school levels. This way of thinking makes it very easy to overlook someone's other skills, resulting in a growing gap between educated and non-educated residents and with that, very divided cities. We need to use the changes in society as an opportunity to lift the youth who is not necessarily outstanding in the school system as we know it now. They need to get the opportunity to develop themselves in other ways, to become the owner of their own learning process ánd of their own environment. This graduation project can be seen as a case study of this need, a first translation of the transition towards learning outside the walls of the school.

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