



Chair of Design
as Politics,
TU Delft

THESIS REFLECTION

PERSONAL INFORMATION

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STUDIO Design as Politics

Theme: City of coming and going
Teachers: Wouter Vanstiphout, Leo van der Burg, Mike Emmerik
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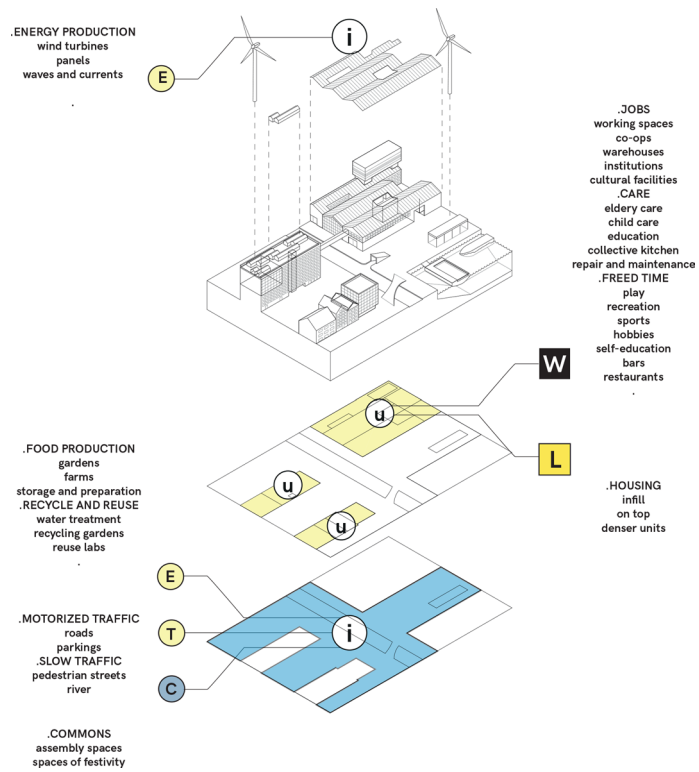
TITLE

Title of the graduation project:

De-growth and the city

Vision for city of Rotterdam beyond pursuit of growth





Plan and axonometry of denser Rotterdam

Overall, In my thesis I examined in-depth indications of the De-growth theory for urban planning, and drew spatial implications from that. The chosen case study is the city of Rotterdam; known for its growing harbour, and its top-down and growth-based paradigm of urban development. The goal is to link economic and environmentally oriented theory to urban planning strategies, via researching possible transformation solutions, and optimizing them for specific locations.

APPROACH

The thesis is motivated by the *urgency* of addressing the issue of infinite growth in a finite ecological system of planet Earth, whose ecological system is becoming measurably overstressed by human activities (43% of planet's surface is covered with agriculture and cities¹). For this reason advocates of De-growth are calling for intentional redirection of our growth based economy towards a different path directed by environmental prosperity. The *solution* is seen in creation of an open systems in which social and economic prosperity are framed by environmental prosperity. In the case of cities, it implies that cities are open systems, dynamic more than efficient, that redirect benefits of social interaction to environmental prosperity – instead of economic one. Numerous existing non-growth practices are already putting this into action, whose principles result in issues that can be traced in *space*, as well.

In the research phase, through reading existing relevant literature, particularly ones of Latouche and Kallis, objectives of De-growth are translated into spatial criterion for planning and design. The way to work with the criterion, was then developed based on personal experiences of participation, as well as studies of self-organized and/or collaborative practices. Here, the key insights were formed through participation in the project Stad in de Maak (in Rotterdam Noord) that actively experiments with new economies, and combines living and work in a collaborative community.

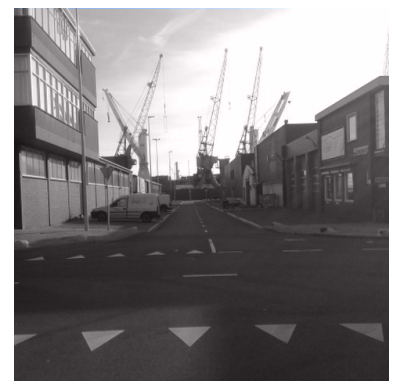
This is the analytical path I followed to established first set of conclusions about potentials of De-growth in space making. Real challenge of research was to upscale these conclusions and to contextualize them in generic types of urban fabric. Test ground of the project is the city of Rotterdam, known for its growing harbour and top-down and growth-based paradigm of urban development. More specifically it is a strip of urban areas in the contact zone between the city's housing areas and the harbour. Here, the study of urban fabric informed the potentials for implementation based on state of amenities, economic and housing conditions, infrastructure and mobility. Combining the analytical and the design-based methods, conclusions are derived on two levels: governance and spatial morphology. This process did not draw a blueprint for implementing De-growth, but it set the foundation for finding a language, and shaping some converging concepts (ie. Commons) which can be implemented in general discourses of urban planning.



Stad in de Maak collective



Commercial bubble of Rotterdam



Growth driven harbour

ASPECTS OF THESIS

In the final reflections, it is required to explain conclusions in terms of their relation between certain aspects of the project.

A) Relation of research and design

First, the thesis subject that is explored is not focused on providing real-time solution for concrete locations through design. The project is using design to visualize a possible future sketched using existing theories. Design here is used as a form of research, applying theory on concrete sites and deriving conclusions from it. The background for this form of research through design is created through analysing sites, urban fabric and contains a theoretical framework.

What can be concluded is that reflecting on how different elements of design and design process on particular location came together can support, correct or discharge preliminary assumptions that were bases for design, and bring new light on the expected outcomes of design after research. Example of this are commons that brought new ideas for governing the De-growth modelled city. Further correction of capacities for transition of different urban types, and proximity to optimal De-growth condition in comparison with the existing state, showed different results other than expected before design. This allowed the project to develop a set of solutions for this transition on a wider level, that can be transferable, and transcalable.

B) Relation between methodical line of approach by chosen studio and students methodological approach

Graduation studio has an approach of using design in different scales and approaches to discuss socio-political dynamics of built environment. It is expected to have a deeper insight in existing economical, political and environmental processes that produce the space today; look into different actors, conditions and set the hypothesis that can be tested through design. In research of theoretical framework, the project created a method of deriving principles, conceptions and spatial implications from a combined reading of theory and analysis of existing practices. A helpful method to obtain practical knowledge of reading, understanding, criticizing and improving formal policy documents was reading and reacting to the document Woonvisie Rotterdam 2030. It explains direct connections between political will and spatial consequence it produces. To act upon these documents, requires skills of an urban planner and negotiator. Although the project tries to work on this ground there is a lot more to learn in tuning together personal ideology, official documentation and planning paradigm and professional skills. In this sense I am inspired and curious about what I will learn in future from this point of view.

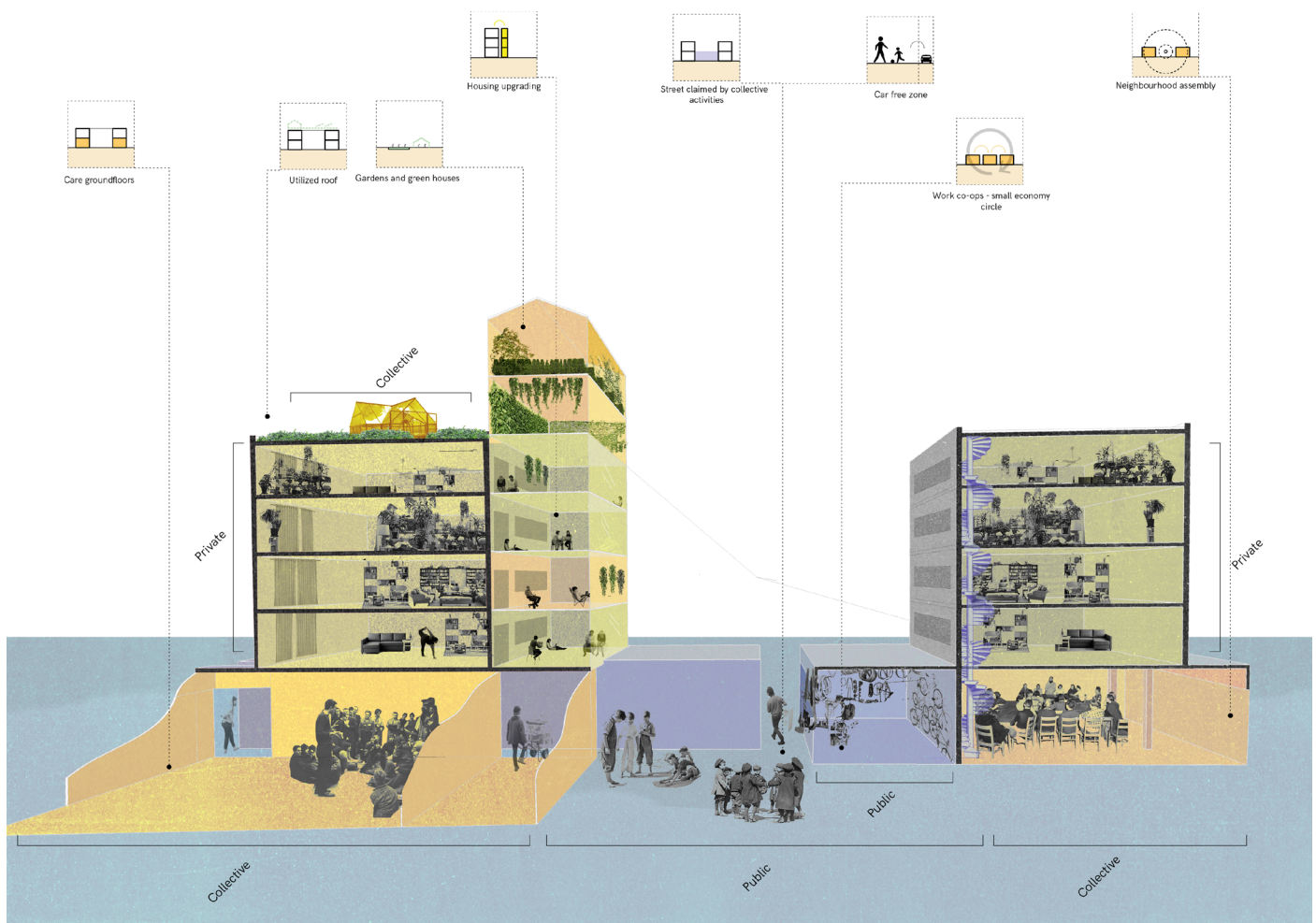
C) The relationship between the project and the wider social context

Continuing on previous reasoning on relation of profession and politics I concluded that I was seriously struggling to balance knowledge, beliefs and opportunities that are framed by reality. I seriously doubt that De-growth will soon have its chance to be implemented and I doubt its ability to adopt to overwhelming sets of urban, social and ideological realities that are out there. However testing ideals in pre-existing spatial context is a sobering but important process. What excites me is that there are other more technical and specific informations and supportive ideas to my beliefs that came out of this project. An example is the role of "commons" in urban planning. Further I conclude that the project is an example of valid efforts to imagine more than rational strict lines of design which TU Delft cherishes. Applied method and detailed scale of design did their best to keep it as convincing and realistic as possible

The following step to support these conclusions would be to zoom out and draw relations on macro scale: city and region. However it was more interesting to work in concrete context on smaller scale and realize that there are so many potential conclusions laying within that scale, that are transferable to other scales and locations. Also the project lacks some in-depth work on the links between

possible actions for transformation, and the final design proposal. The result is a feeling of incoherence between different parts of the project.

For this reason the project did not fully answer the research question. The lack of coherence between different implications of research and design part of the project happened due to ambitious methodological framework and lack of focus on existing examples that could bring the project closer to being a real visualization of a De-growth-based future scenario. On the other hand, the relation between transformations of existing physical structures based on theoretical implications, managed to stay tight and informative.



Household units envisioned in De-growth scenario

CONCLUSION

The relation of urgency-solution-space, is enriched by few conclusions; which is where I find the most relevant contribution of my work so far. So instead of chronologically recapitulating the whole process and complex methodology I will report my work with three essays presenting these conclusions:

- a) Urban forms are primarily the result of processes strongly dependent on governance. In this sense De-growth should be a designed process. The first aim is to go beyond small, local scale, spontaneous projects, towards occupying actual multi-scalar planing fields with the urgency for transition towards De-growth
- b) De-growth is a form of sensible densification. The process of implementation can be measured, transferable and planned.
- c) The capacity of urban fabric to contain tactics for transition of socio-economic relations depends heavily on paths and patterns of mobilisation in local and municipal level. For this reason it is important to draw a clear distinction between spaces and flows governed and design as common, collective or private.

REFLECTION

Report is reflecting the 8-months-long process of investigating the implications of De-growth for practice of urban planing and design. Reflection is given in form of abstracts for three semi-academic essays that are themed around main discussions opened by the work on the thesis. Topics reflect three phases in placing De-growth in urban environment: Pioneering, Negotiating and Dwelling.

1. Meet the Pioneers

How to go beyond the folk politics of small spontaneous local and limited actions?

(Keywords: Urban planing, Scales of governance, Commons, Collaborative practices)

There is a number of collectives, projects and initiatives that are not only non-growth oriented but they are decolonizing the ways space is produced and managed from mainstreams of growth-oriented economy. By analysing how they conceptualize their principles into space it is possible to understand essentially different spatial characteristics they produce. They are the seed of the De-growth we are looking for in the cities. However their impact is limited, they are often non-systematic and time-demanding examples of incredible collective and personal efforts that find no way in upscaling to city scale. Urgency addressed by De-growth is looking for multi-scalar approach to implementations of these principles. Here lays the answer to the role of urban planing for implementation of De-growth. This means that urban planing for De-growth has to work with different scales of governance. From initiating neighbourhood assemblies and action groups on district and even block scale to taking boldly the power of municipal and regional governance to implement commons on city scale and beyond and further, to occupy the professional discussions aiming for implementing limits on expansion of motorized traffic or urban sprawl etc.

Urban planing in this case is designing the process of transition more than process of design of final outcome. Capacity of urban planing to design this process is essentially connected to different scales of governance. Urban planners with their knowledge and space as a tool can manage to lift many dispersed projects into comprehensive model of transition. Pioneers, therefore, have to occupy space, physical and professional and learn from experiences in different scales.

2. Meet the Negotiators

What is capacity of existing urban morphology for achieving De-growth goals?

(Keywords: Densification, Indicators of transition, Adaptive planing, Quantification, Urban fabric, Urban types, Transferability)

The growth imperative in urban environments sets the demand for expansion in various forms. From demand for physical space (i.e. infrastructure and personal space) to demand for energy and resources that results in expansion of non-physical footprint of the cities (ie. Energy demand or CO2 emission). The thesis recognizes densification and strong partition of private/public space from spaces for common resources as a way to set the boundaries to this process. This way square meter per person is reduced, spaces for jobs-care-freed time are in balance, need for mobility is reduced, and city becomes a dynamic rather than an efficient system, where different areas serve multiple purposes. Down with the zoning!

The thesis sets measurable indicators for framing this densification and partition. In example minimum 30% of private cars per household substituted by alternatives i.e. car sharing, subsidized life-style would be indicator of taking a De-growth course of development.

Set of the indicators presented in the thesis is measurable but what makes it transferable is placing them into 7 generic urban types different historically, typo-morphologically and functionally and testing them. This way indicators became site-specific and design oriented. However, crucial next step would be to establish a scenario based projections that include tipping points. Here planners have to act as negotiators establishing frames and boundaries in an open-ended process of transition.

3. Meet the Dwellers

What is materialization, aesthetics and limits of De-growth city?

(Keywords: Urban design, Open space, Socio-economic dynamics, Materialization)

Causal relation between principles and materialization of De-growth in the cities is rather unexplored by this thesis. Maybe the city of De-growth would not look much different from what it does now, it certainly doesn't have it's own typology but it produces different livelihood within existing forms. The one that is possible to coexist with most of the existing parameters of urbanity. Transition has to happen parallel to existing forms of urban life, not against them (as long as they are willing and able to refrain from endless consumption and expansion).

The capacity of urban fabric to contain tactics for transition of socio-economic relations depends heavily on paths and patterns of mobilisation in local and municipal level. For this reason it is important to draw clear distinction between spaces and flows governed and design as common, collective or private. Aesthetics of existing non-growth oriented practices suggest rather eclectic collage of ready made, second-hand, low fi projects. It is already addressed that transformation from small scale projects to systematic models, is a major challenge for urban planing. The clues about how an eclectic city scale model looks like, and what livelihood it performs, are rare. But following research of Stavros Stavrides or Pelin Tan we could stumble upon examples of Gezi Park resistance or anti-austerity Greek reality, where we see performing the transition of values that reshape the urban scape. Normalization of urgency in certain contexts, sets the paths for mobilization that further bursts the interventions in private, public and space of commons. The De-growth can be implemented only to the extent in which it develops simultaneously on different scales. How scales relate to each other, sets the limit to horizon by which transition can happen.

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| QUESTIONS | <p>RQ What are the spatial implications of applying the De-growth principles in urban planning of the city of Rotterdam?</p> | | | | | |
| | <p>Q1 How the imperative of growth shapes the city of Rotterdam?</p> | <p>Q2 How does new non-growth oriented economy influence space in example of everyday practices of collaborative housing/working?</p> | <p>Q3 What are the spatial implications of the Degrowth theory?</p> | <p>D4 Spatial indicators of the De-growth transition?</p> | <p>D5 City scape that is produced based on De-growth</p> | <p>D6 Transition towards De-growth</p> |
| METHODS | Study of history, Spatial analysis, | Comparative study | Literature study Research through design | Site analysis, Literature study | Design 1:1000 | Strategy development |
| TECHNIQUE | Mapping, timelines Study of publications | Participation, Comparison, Reading of literature Theory paper | Reading of literature, Sketching, Analogy | Mapping, data comparison, Research through design | Design, Examples study | Phasing, literature study |
| OUTCOME | Analysis -Choice of scale -Choice of areas | Method of application -Method of implementation -Choice of models for implementation | Towards design -5 groups of spatial inputs -Strategy on regional level -Goals of design | Tables of indicators -7 Urban types -5 spatial inputs -set of tactics | Design proposal | Action plan -set of tactics -phases of transition -governance model |

Plan of research

The only sustainable growth is De-growth!

