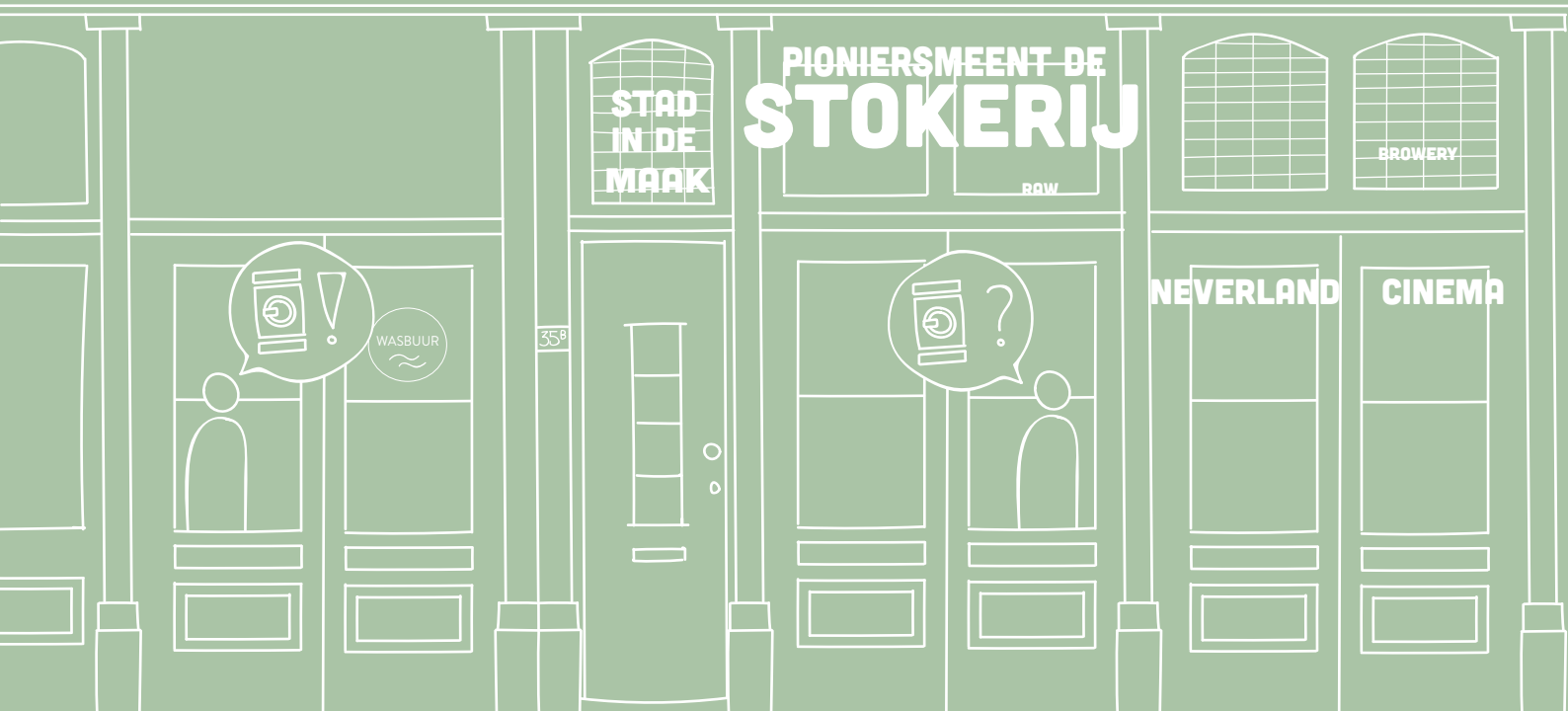


WHAT'S MINE IS OURS

Empowering cohousing communities towards self-organization through sharing economy



COLOPHON

What's mine is ours: empowering cohousing communities towards self-organization through sharing economy.

Reflection MSc thesis/P5 report

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Delft University of Technology
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MSc programs

MSc Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences (Management in the Built Environment track)
MSc Science Education and Communication (Science Communication track)

Domain Management in the Built Environment

Housing Management

Mentors MSc Management in the Built Environment

First mentor: Dr. D.K. (Darinka) Czischke Ljubetic
Second mentor: Dr. A. (Aksel) Ersoy

Mentors MSc Science Communication

First mentor: Dr. M.C.A. (Maarten) van der Sanden
Second mentor: Dr. ir. S.M. (Steven) Flipse
SEC professor: Prof. dr. M.J. (Marc) de Vries

Front cover

Own illustration of Stad in de Maak: Pieter de Raadtstraat 35-37, Rotterdam.

REFLECTION



This reflection consists of five components. First of all, the relationship between the research and both MSc programs will be reflected upon. Secondly, the research design and used methods are reflected upon. Thirdly, the applicability of the results of the research is presented. This is followed by any ethical issues and dilemma's that were come across during the research. Lastly, a personal reflection is given.

RELATIONSHIP RESEARCH AND MBE/SC

This research was carried out for two MSc programs, namely the MSc Management in the Built Environment, and MSc Science Communication. As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, I intended to elevate the result by combining management and communication. The MBE program focuses on managing urban development and construction process to help stakeholders achieve high quality and financially rewarding development. This research presented an in-depth view of the residential processes that are part of living in cohousing and cohousing development. The research was thus tailored to the wishes of residential stakeholders. The results can help them improve the quality of their cohousing project, and possibly also make their housing more affordable. The communication tool is a practical example of how they could go around doing this. However, the research was not only focused on residential stakeholders, as the co-founders of Stad in de Maak, and the housing corporation, were also part of the research. The results may also benefit Havensteder, as Stad in de Maak can use the findings to improve their position towards the institutional environment they are part of.

Science Communication focuses on optimizing strategic communication processes within and between organizations and society. In the end, innovations can be attuned to societal demands. In this research, cohousing can be perceived as the innovation which might help deal with problems on the housing market. The whole research was intertwined in such a manner that the MBE and SC parts are not really distinguishable anymore, but one could say that the communication tool is a result which was triggered by SC thinking, even though it has managerial implications as well. The communication tool is a practical example of what could change within cohousing to work towards improving this ‘innovation’.

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS

In this section, the research design and used methods are reflected upon.

Before looking at the methods themselves, I would like to discuss the relation between the problem statement (affordability of housing, and the increase in single-person households) and the studied concepts: sharing economy, self-organization and social capital.

Initially, the idea was to focus on sharing economy as this is an economy, which I connected to potential for financial feasibility and a focus on affordability. However, the research took a bit of a different turn, with a focus more on communication-related aspects

and less so on the financial side of sharing economy. This can be attributed to two things. First of all, self-organization and social capital focus a lot on the relationships between people. Of course, financial feasibility is a part of self-organization, but many other components are present as well. The scope of the research thus extended beyond financial feasibility only, and towards the communication processes that are part of cohousing and sharing. This shift took place gradually throughout the research. Secondly, the interview results presented that sharing economy is not only about financially rewarding sharing, but can have a lot of other components as well, such as building friendships or a network. Of course, saving money is an advantage which was found in the interview, but within cohousing sharing economies are broader than that. In the end, thus, affordability has an indirect relationship with the interview results. However, I do think the results of this research are useful to understand what sharing can mean for a cohousing community and how they can utilize the positive effects of sharing to improve their level of self-organization.

Literature study

A literature study was used as a source of information on the following topics: collaborative housing and cohousing, sharing economy, self-organization, empowerment and social capital.

The set-up of the literature study was quite disorganized at the beginning, which led to a lot of unstructured information. Later, the literature study was structured to make it more clear how the data was collected.

In sum, the literature study provided solid starting points for this research, but the lack of a clear structure at the beginning led to extra work and makes it more complex to check whether all useful literature has been taken into account.

Semi-structured interviews

The interviews were used to gain an understanding from the perspective of residents of Stad in de Maak, co-founders of Stad in de Maak and involved housing corporation employees on the studied topics.

The fact that semi-structured interviews were used, was useful to gather as much information as possible and to let the interviewee guide the topics at hand. Furthermore, the three different perspectives (i.e. resident, co-founder, housing corporation) that were given complemented each other.

However, one downside of the interviews was the small resource group, which was due to research fatigue at the studied case. Furthermore, subjective interpretation of

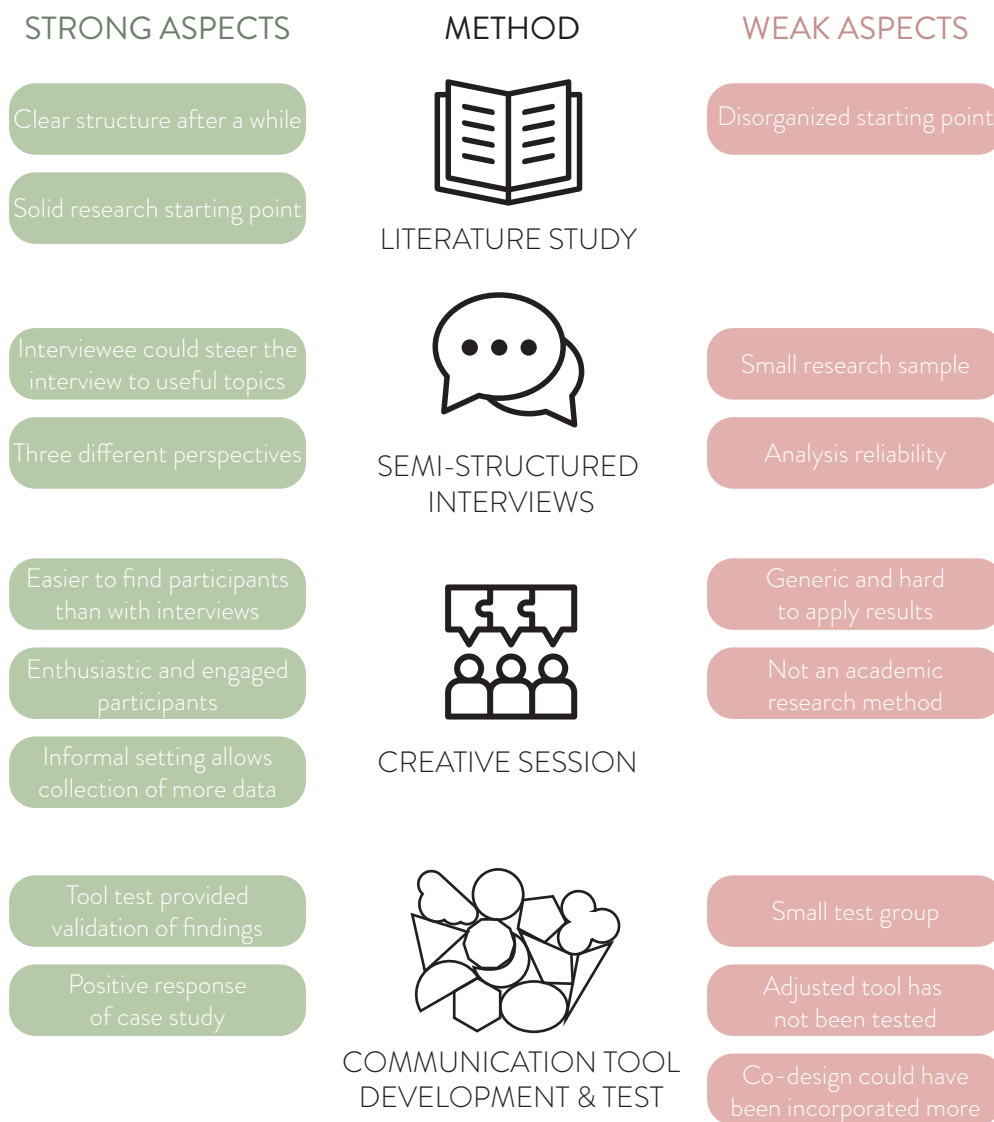


Figure 9.1. Strong and weak aspects of the used methods. (own ill.)

the data had to be avoided. This was done by setting up variables and codes for the interview analysis, and by sending out a validation to interviewees.

Creative session

A creative session was selected as a research method to avoid research fatigue. Many Stad in de Maak residents are artists or designers, and it was argued that a creative session fits well with this target group. Three aspects about the creative session were positive. First of all, more participants were found than for the interviews, and these were also new residents (i.e. residents that had not been interviewed). As a result, a larger group of residents had been reached with the research. Secondly, the setting of the creative session allowed for an enthusiastic group of participants which actively engaged in the session. Thirdly, the creative session allowed for information that probably would not have been collected with a formal interview, as participants feel more comfortable and less 'studied'.

However, the creative session also had two weaker aspects. First of all, the outcomes of the session were still quite generic and not as applicable as one would hope when setting up a creative session. Secondly, a creative session cannot be analyzed in a traditional academic manner. Thus, results and statements are anecdotal.

Communication tool development and test session

The results of the research were used to design and develop a communication tool. This tool was tested in a session with residents from Stad in de Maak. Two positive aspects of this research step can be noted. First of all, the test session provided an opportunity to validate the findings from the interviews. Of the three participants, two had not been interviewed, and thus the resident group that was part of this research became bigger. The residents noted aspects that were also part of the interview results, thus confirming these findings. Secondly, the response to the communication

tool and test session was positive. One resident, who had previously declined an invitation to be interviewed as he was tired of researchers taking up his time, was very enthusiastic that the tool was developed and that I came by to test it. He elaborated that I was the first researcher that returned with a practical method to help Stad in de Maak, which was why he was willing to take part in the test session. This shows, similar to the creative session, that interdisciplinary research or using alternative research methods might be a useful approach to deal with research fatigue in cohousing or collaborative housing research. Alternative research methods might impact the reliability of the result, but can increase the applicability, as the communication tool illustrates.

However, three negative aspects can be noted as well. The test group was quite small, namely with three participants. The tool can be used in larger groups as well, and the effects of this have not been tested yet. Secondly, based on the test, it became clear that the tool does not meet all design requirements. Adjustments have been proposed, but these have not been tested, so it is unclear whether with these adjustments, the tool will meet its design requirements. Lastly, the principles of co-design could have implemented better in the communication tool design process, to improve its outcomes and empower the residents partaking in the process.

RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

As mentioned in the introduction, the interest for the concept of collaborative housing is growing. The housing market is under pressure, and this research aimed to bring attention to that subject by focusing on a specific case study. The practical implications are threefold.

First of all, Stad in de Maak as a case study can benefit from the results of this research to deepen their understanding of the strengths and challenges of their cohousing initiative. Furthermore, the communication tool hands them a practical solution to deal with the communication challenge in their housing project.

Secondly, the results might be translated to the wider cohousing context, for example by validating the findings with other cohousing projects. This would make the results applicable to other cohousing initiatives as well, who could then draw lessons from this research to improve their project. Again, the communication tool could be a practical way of doing so.

Thirdly, the communication tool in general can be used in communities, not even necessarily cohousing communities, to improve trust and association and

understand ambiguity in the ideas and thoughts of those that are part of the community. The communication tool was developed for the specific case study, but its application is not limited to housing projects. The tool can be used in any context in which discussions need to be supported and where ambiguity is at play.

ETHICAL ISSUES

This study raised one ethical issue, which also has been mentioned in section 3.5. The used methods collected personal data of participants, namely their address, but also personal details about how they perceived their living environment.

To ensure privacy of the participants, all data was anonymized in this thesis. It is not possible to deduct from this thesis who the residents were that participated in this research. Furthermore, to ensure participants understood how data was collected and processed, informed consents were used for the interviews, creative session and tool test (Appendices A7, A8, C1, D4).

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Lastly, I will reflect on my personal development and what I have learned during this thesis process. This will be done by looking at four aspects. First of all, I will state what I learned from carrying out an interdisciplinary thesis project. Secondly, I will elaborate on how I look back on the feedback that I was given and how I translated feedback into my work. Thirdly, I will discuss how I used and incorporated the feedback between the green light and the final presentation to improve my research. Lastly, I will reflect on how I learned from my own work, both on the content level and on the process/personal level.

Learning from interdisciplinary research

From the beginning of my thesis, I was certain I wanted to fully integrate the two research projects I had to carry out. I thought this would be the most efficient way of doing the research, but most important, it fit well with the whole reason I wanted to study communication next to management in the first place: studying the deeper communication layer which is often forgotten, and understand how you can utilize it to support innovation. At some moments, I have definitely wondered why I ever decided to do a Double Degree, as it puts an extra layer of pressure on top of an already challenging study phase. However, looking back, I can say that I have learned three important things from carrying out this interdisciplinary research project, which I otherwise would not have learned.

First of all, I learned that managing your thesis, thus the administrative aspects and things like getting your mentors together at the right moment and on the same page, can be quite challenging. This did not always run smoothly, even though I tried my best to ensure it did. Sometimes it felt a bit like juggling with all the expectations and rules and regulations from both departments. I think this is very useful to have experienced, as it will most likely be a part of my future career as well. Also, it speaks to the level of independence and individual responsibility you are supposed to have after doing a master's degree.

Secondly, carrying out the integrated thesis allowed me to start seeing the overlaps between the two research fields. All my previous master courses had been separate, thus in my mind, the two fields were still somewhat separate. However, in your thesis you continuously think about the overlap between the fields, and the value of your research for both fields. This was challenging at times, but in the end I think my research fit together really well, which is illustrative of how tied together management and communication is in our day-to-day lives. As a science communication professional it is essential to be able to 'see' the communication layers in your professional practice, so I am very happy I got to learn that throughout this project.

Lastly, doing an integrated thesis project means having more mentors than a regular student. This meant I was lucky, as I got to learn from people with very different backgrounds and areas expertise. I think all these different perspectives helped me to, hopefully, bring my thesis to a higher level, which was what I aimed to achieve by doing this integrated project.

Feedback

For feedback, there are four aspects I would like to address.

At the P2, one of my main points of feedback was to learn to work autonomously and trust my own judgment and skills. This was something I had to remember myself of regularly during the graduation process. Even though I had always successfully completed the courses preceding the thesis project, I struggled with the uncertainty and autonomy that was part of doing a thesis, especially at the beginning. Suddenly, there are no clear guidelines or goals. Apart from some feedback from time to time, you have to believe in your own judgment as a researcher. Of course, there are academic rules you should follow, but within this academic framework there is still a lot of freedom. This turned out to be a blessing and a curse. At the beginning, it felt more like a curse, but over the course of the project I realized that my research was about how I wanted to approach it and this gave me a lot of breathing

room. Overall, I think I was able to use this feedback from the P2 to grow both on content level, but also on process level.

Secondly, another P2 feedback aspect was to stay critical of the concepts I was dealing with. I chose this topic out of idealism, and thus it was hard at the beginning to be critical of cohousing. However, the research itself proved to be a good wake-up call. The process and results learned me that cohousing is far from a perfect solution, and the idealism of those involved makes it more complicated to deal with its shortcomings. I got the impression that especially the co-founders mistake idealism with creating an ideal solutions. As I have seen, the project does great things, but it is far from ideal, as the ideal solution simply does not exist.

From a more practical perspective, I always made notes from the meetings and tried to incorporate all feedback points afterwards. For example, at the P3 I got the feedback that I should validate my findings. I immediately set this up and succeeded in validating my findings in time. This is illustrative for my approach, in which I always try to do something with the feedback, no matter how small. I tried to take all feedback as useful steps forward, and not criticism as to what I have done "wrong". That is not the intention from your mentors, and it is also not the right way to look at it if you want to learn from your feedback.

Lastly, managing the feedback from both master programs sometimes proved to be challenging. Even though I was lucky, as the programs do not conflict and actually fit together really well, there may be different ideas on how to set up the thesis report, for example. I tried to get feedback from both programs whenever I had reached a certain milestone, and, when there was conflicting feedback, I would weigh the feedback and then decide myself how I wanted to proceed. This again ties into trusting my own judgment and working autonomously.

Between the green light and the final presentation

At the green light, I stated several points of improvements. I wanted to create a small brochure, make adjustments to the communication tool, improve the visual aspects of the thesis, and incorporate the feedback I got at the meeting. I will now discuss if and how I tried to make these improvements.

First of all, I made the brochure, which can be found in Appendix E1. This is a short and sweet overview of the research findings on two sheets of A4 paper which can be folded into each other. I intend to visit Stad in de Maak after graduating, to hand over the tool and leave a couple prints of the brochure there.

Secondly, I adjusted the tool by adjusting the manual, as this was proposed by the participants of the tool test. This

manual responds to the remarks made by the residents. However, the manual has not been tested unfortunately, as it was not possible to arrange this with the case within the final weeks.

Thirdly, looking at the visual aspects, I mainly made improvements in chapter 7, the communication tool. I used match/mismatch table to clarify the design process. Other than that, I was quite happy with the visual output of my research, and decided to focus on the content of the thesis and improving the text.

Lastly, looking at the feedback I got at the green light, I started by writing down all the feedback and trying to find the main pain points of the research. I used my final weeks to focus on three main aspects: the main research question and research gap and whether I addressed it, the step from the research finding to the communication tool and clarifying this process, and adjusting chapter 8 to incorporate and present the findings in a critical and thorough manner. During these final weeks, I also had to realize that unfortunately you are never truly finished with a thesis. You will always see imperfections that will continue to be there, as once you've polished them, other imperfections pop up. In that sense, the '(Im)Perfection Puzzle' could also be a metaphor for my thesis research.

Learning points content-wise and process-wise

In this section, the things I have learned on content level and process level are elaborated on. Some aspects that have been mentioned earlier in this personal reflection.

On content level, three main aspects can be noted. First of all, this research helped me understand the ambiguity and complexity of cohousing initiatives. At the beginning of this research, I thought the problems cohousing initiatives face are merely outside of their scope, for example between the initiative and the institutional environment. However, this research learned me that within the cohousing projects there can be a lot of problems as well, which complexes the already complex situation these initiatives are in. This contributed to my second learning point, namely taking a critical perspective towards the research subject. At the beginning, it was easy to confuse my interest with enthusiasm or support of the concept. Now, I have taken a more academic stance in which I tried to understand the concept, which is separate from

whether or not I agree with the concept. Lastly, I have learned a lot about carrying out academic research. This includes how hard it can be to gather data when research fatigue is present within your case. I learned that academic research is not only about gathering the data, but also consists of a lot of management aspects, which can be even harder than the actual "thinking" you are doing.

On the process level, I have learned two valuable things about myself during this process. First of all, I learned to trust my own judgment and thinking, and that this is an important part of academic research as well. If I look back on the process, I feel that, even though intellectually it can be challenging, the biggest challenge is mentally. Almost all conversations with my friends the past months have been about either my thesis or their thesis, and, independent of personality, a thesis gets under everyone's skin. I certainly had not expected that I would struggle with this, as overall I am confident about my skills and work ethic. This is also why I am proud of myself and proud of this thesis, as finishing this shows that I pushed through even when nobody wanted to be interviewed, or even when I thought I could never finish everything in time. In the thesis process, you are either running or at a standstill, which can be very tiring, but – if you're open to it – you can learn a lot about yourself on top of learning about the topic itself. Furthermore, my thesis challenged me to be more flexible and open-minded. I like to take a structured approach towards life in general, and as a result also towards studying. Whenever I have to finish an assignment, I set up a plan, and I carry out that plan. However, when doing a thesis you have to go with the flow sometimes, and adjust your research plan if it turns out that it does not fit. Accepting this was challenging for me. In the end, however, I am happy that I tried to stay flexible. This allowed me to think about what research steps would be best for my research, and I could incorporate things I found along the way.

In sum, I think I used this graduation process to learn about both the topic and myself, which resulted in a quite intense but rewarding year. My thesis may never be perfect, as I addressed, but accepting the imperfections may be the most important learning point of all.

Nina van Wijk, November 2019

