

P4 reflection paper

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Explore Lab Graduation Studio

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Aspect 1: The relationship between research and design

The research aimed to investigate how micro-living could become socially sustainable for the metropolitan urban environment of Inner London. The research was focused and divided into three aspects relating to this topic.

The historical aspect was examined to gain knowledge on the relation between compact housing and its socio-demographic target groups, and the relation and relevance of compact housing to the city. I found this aspect to be relevant as it would elucidate how the current inner city has been constructed from multiple layers of urban fabric originating from different times in history. The political and socio-demographic factors that drove the creation of compact housing, have to this day marked this type of housing with a clear and direct relation to affordability, locality and a significance for the economic workforce of Inner London. Therefore, compact housing needs to be solidified in its presence in the inner city and to be consciously pushed and developed.

A lifestyle analysis focused on the meanings and values related to compact dwelling. It served to clarify the priorities and compromises connected to its target group. This research uncovered added qualities that could be implemented. In cutting living space, social activities were the first to be excluded from the compact home and therefore become a main focus for improvement.

A spatial analysis for the interior programme further analyzes activities found in the lifestyle analysis and relates them to limited physical dimensions. The space needed per activity was analyzed, and how the activity relates to the physical properties of the space as well.

The most defining conclusion is that compact housing has to hold a somewhat paradoxical social character. In inner city spaces, social activity and private social space shifts and extends into the open space. This can be explained by 1) the notion of privacy shifting in a social-cultural sense (private activities can take place in public spaces as well, outside of the home), and 2) the ambiguity that can be found in public space that operates between the private and public spheres. The residents can be defined by their diversity and anonymity in living styles and do not seem not to require much social engagement in their direct living surroundings, as they live close to the city's spaces in which they can act out private social meetings. However, adding possibilities for private social activities within the micro-home forms an added quality and mitigates the jump from severely limited private space to the vast public space. This served as the stepping stone for the concept of the project.

Aspect 2: The relationship between your graduation project and the Explore Lab graduation studio

Explore Lab is a graduation studio for students with a preference for graduating in an individually chosen subject that fascinates them, which cannot be found or done in another graduation track. The student has to personally set up and define the graduation research and goal, as well as define the methodic framework. My main fascination was with modern transitional and itinerant lifestyles found mostly in metropolitan living environments, and how these influence the act of dwelling into taking on a more nomadic character. It changes how people live in their dwellings as well as the expectations and the definition of a home. The graduation project served as an exploration of how with limited space, space for dwelling and enjoyment of inner city living could still be found. The relevance lies in how the everyday living environment is designed and how the area transformation deals with the existing urban context, while increasing the living density. The character of the project can be described as having a Dwelling-heavy focus, engaging with urban complexity, planning and interior design. This led to Explore Lab as the only studio providing the possibility to graduate in this specific project.

Aspect 3: Elaboration on research method and approach chosen in relation to Explore Lab's methodical line of inquiry, reflecting thereby upon the scientific relevance of the work

As mentioned before, Explore Lab does not have a specific theme nor a methodic approach innate to the studio. Moreover, the research to be conducted did not have any prescribed specifications or limitations. Thus the chosen research method and approach was set up individually.

Within the graduation research I focused on elements that provided an overall picture of micro-housing's social dimensions, consequently to use as a base-concept for design. To grasp a part of its complexity, I looked for different elements to be reviewed, such as ground ownership, transit oriented design, current Inner London land use, socio-economic divisions, lifestyle research, activity-based spatial uses, authorities and organizations in housing development.

The historic analysis in the research showed that displacement of compact housing was associated with the displacement of residents to a more disadvantaged situation, leading to problems of social exclusion and higher living costs, which makes a case for preserving affordable compact homes in the inner city. Therefore I looked to find spaces in Inner London that were transformable to make new housing. The spaces eligible were analyzed in their relation to factors found to be important to the lifestyle, which can be summarized into proximity and accessibility. Proximity entails the possibility to reach daily destinations and services by walking distances, such that these actions are done spontaneously. Accessibility means having access to transport services to destinations for work, out of neighbourhood leisure activities, or other further away destinations. This resulted in the significance of connecting compact housing to a neighbourhood in which a high level of walkability, the proximity to daily destinations and high accessibility to other destinations. This was exemplar of how I found the research into the various elements to help me in understanding and grounding the research and the design project.

Next to the submitted research, additional research was made on my own. In the first place I proposed to make it all a part of the submitted research. However in feedback from the research tutor, I got convinced to have a research that was converging and limited to one subject, to push it into a more scientific format. This was a struggle for me, as I was convinced and set out to research multiple elements instead of a single aspect. Reflecting on this, the submitted report could have been more coherent and focused if additional elements had been left out.

Aspect 4: Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework, touching upon the transferability of the project results

The main imperative of the project was to provide more housing in the inner city of London by employing smaller and compacted housing, as a reaction to current crises concerning rising living costs, a changing socio-cultural demographic trend towards small households, scarcity of space and solutions of high density living. The research and project show an approach in which existing inner city land of London is transformed.

The project is based on: 1) preservation of existing homes, identifying possible relations to be made to existing urban elements, and additions to the housing stock on transformed spaces which were previously (becoming) obsolete spaces, in order to create higher living densities (*professional framework*), 2) a programme brief comprised of a 50% / 50% division of private and social housing, which is of particular importance to Inner London in furthering subsidized living arrangements for its residents, within the overpronounced private housing market. Furthermore, spatial aspects, functional aspects, contextual aspects and socio-cultural aspects, are all analysed as closely related and directly translated into the design (*social framework*), 3) the scientific relevance lies in the understanding of the socio-cultural embeddedness of (architectural) space, which is based on the assumption that the act of dwelling and the actions of the dweller are highly driven by the direct spatial living environment. However, this project not inasmuch researches theories, but should be regarded as an explorative investigation into micro-housing environments. This complies with the approach and nature of Explore Lab which focuses more on one's individual architectural approach and emphasizes on discovery and testing.

The project is transferable in a conceptual sense of transforming urban space, by stringing along locations of micro units with the already available nearby services, while emphasizing walkability, cyclability, proximity & accessibility, and creating extensions and translations for private activities into semi-public and public spaces. The concept ultimately revolves creating an activity-multiplicitous urban space as a rich living environment for micro-housing. The specific relevance for London, is to with this concept search and identify pockets of transformable inner city land, and aim to preserve the locally characteristic medium building heights while realizing high living densities.

Aspect 5: Discuss the ethical issues and dilemmas you may have encountered in (i) doing the research, (ii, if applicable) elaborating the design and (iii) potential applications of the results in practice

While doing the research I encountered how compact housing in Inner London is currently presented as a need that arose from the 1980s, when business and employment in the inner city changed from being industrial into a knowledge-based economy, bringing in highly educated individuals distinctive by their small household sizes and preference for living alone. While this certainly is a significant group, and the main target for many new housing projects, the majority of the one-person households has a need for subsidized social housing. Although this matter surpasses the field of architecture, I took into account the need for social housing within the already highly privatized housing market. This was translated into the design brief, which holds a 50-50 division of social and private units, and a suggestion for building management consisting of a collaboration between borough, Transport for London (main London transit services), private ground owners, and a housing association.

Another dilemma I encountered was during the designing of the small living units. The transition into a smaller living space should change from being a forced necessity into a compromise one is willing to make in order to live in the inner city. It was never my goal to create the smallest spaces possible, I set up the project based on the opinion that compact housing deserves to be looked into for its possibilities for comfort and quality, when the home and its surrounding neighbourhood are developed as an interrelated whole. Therefore the design does not only comprise housing, but a transformation of its direct surroundings as well. During the designing of the units I was faced with the physical spatial limitations of the site location and the personal design decisions concerning dwelling unit sizes. This was by far the hardest dilemma to solve, as there was an ethical aspect attached to it, and because solutions could only be found in by exploring into spatial and functional variations of the design. There were the added difficulties of the site being located next to an elevated overpass which created a visual blockade and noise, the translation of research into design which demanded creating social space in between units while still ensuring a high building density, and small-scale interior-level configurations which enabled comfort and quality while living on a small footprint.

The project has been an exploration into how to densify urban living areas, taking London as the study case. There is a strong relation of the actual context to the developed design. Potential applications of the results in practice are the different perspectives in which transformations could create possibilities for the micro-housing type and residents in small households within the spatial and functional limitations of inner city land. It is characterised by a multi-scale analytical approach in which as much as possible win-win situations are sought.