

Reflection – Marit van 't Walderveen – 4841905

1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, the studio topic, your master track (A,U,BT,LA,MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?

The master programme MSc AUBS is focused on working in a multi-disciplinary way to create integrated solutions for the built environment. The architecture track takes a closer look at the building level. The Dwelling studio Designing for Care aims to research and design for societal-, health-, and care- related issues. My graduation topic is about finding a living environment for adults with a Mild Intellectual Disability (MID) that supports social interaction within an urban context. By taking a holistic approach, looking at different architectural scales, and empirically studying the needs of a vulnerable target group it fits in the larger master programme of MSc AUBS but also the more specific studio topic.

2. How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

During the course I became familiar with different perspectives on health & care, more specifically on how to go about adults with an MID, and learned that these perspectives are ever changing. This brings along a wide range or even shifting demands for their living environment and possible (housing) typologies, which creates an interesting role for architects, or in the case of this graduation project, myself as an architecture student. I needed to position myself early on by choosing a paradigm for example for my theoretical framework, which directly influenced my research direction and final design outcome.

The other way around, seemingly conflicting guidelines derived from the research like avoiding overstimulation and the need for social interaction were influenced by the practicality of the design project. The spatial elements based on the guidelines needed to be combined or placed together, which made me aware that a hierarchy/scale or balance between the guidelines was necessary in order to be able to implement the results from my research effectively into the design project.

3. How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

Choosing to research and design for adults with an MID, my approach for this graduation project, helps to create awareness for this large group of people that deserve extra attention regarding their living environment. Since the intellectual difficulties of adults with an MID are not directly visible in their appearance and their disability is only 'mild', they can act in such a way that it seems like they do not need support or care. Their abilities to care for themselves and the idea that they can live on their own are often overestimated resulting in unfit housing situations. The research done for my graduation project is not trying to prove that their living situation is the direct problem which is causing this group to participate less in society, be less satisfied with life and the reason why they are more often lonely compared to people without a disability, but it does stress the potential for architects to create an environment in which adults with an MID can flourish. My approach reflects the responsibility (future) architects have to create the best possible environment for all users, but especially for those who might need some extra attention and carry the risk of being overlooked.

Furthermore, by observing, listening closely and doing interviews not only with caregivers and relatives, but also preparing understandable yet interesting questions to ask adults with an MID themselves gave me a deep and broad understanding at the same time. Despite the relatively short fieldwork week in which I met the target group for the first time, I was able to gather a lot of valuable information. The empirical methods which I used to bring forward their needs and wishes for the living environment on multiple scales, reaching from the urban level to the building itself, worked well to come up with architectural guidelines. The chosen methods and used methodology proved to be successful for what I wanted to accomplish with this graduation research. Using five different spatial aspects (based on the theoretical framework) to guide the interviews and compare the case studies was very effective in retrospect. It made it easy to describe the conditions needed in the living environment for adults with an MID in an architectural way, which I thought would be a challenge upfront.

4. How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

There are housing projects developed specifically to accommodate people with an MID, however most of them are fixed on one specific care system with its matching typology, like group living or living independently with a support point in the building. My research describes the potential for a new way of living for adults with an MID, looking at the neighbourhood, surrounding and building level altogether and challenges the way care and support is currently provided for adults with an MID, combining multiple typologies. Creating guidelines that avoid overstimulation, connect them with others (with or without an MID) in a clear and structured way and implementing those guidelines in subtle, ordinary looking ways is difficult, but necessary according to my research in order for them to grow as independent as possible, which seems to be the common goal of adults with an MID. The scope of the research is narrowed to a spatial level, taking into account the environmental and social (care) needs of adults with an MID, but not the specific financial and legal aspects that might need to adapt in order to realise a design project according to these guidelines.

From the fieldwork and interviews done for this research can be concluded that adults with an MID form a large and diverse group of people in our society that are often overlooked or misjudged. Actively involving this target group and listening directly to what they have to say creates a valuable but ethically difficult situation for myself as a researcher. Their intellectual disability should not stand in the way of their participation in my research, however it does need to be taken in consideration when asking for consent or permission to do research and (academically) publish about their personal living environment and everyday activities for example. They might not be able to understand the full implications of what it means to participate in my research and should be protected without diminishing their contribution. By not naming the fieldwork location, not photographing participants and giving everyone a pseudonym for example, I make sure their identities are confidential but all the information that they provide is still left in their own words.

5. How do you assess the value of the transferability of you project results?

By paying close attention to designing the everyday environment of adults with an MID, I make sure that their surroundings are not holding them back or overestimating them, as this often seems to be the problem when designing for this specific target group. The research tries to capture how adults with an MID are able to reach their full potential within their living environment and how this can be translated into a design by providing specific architectural

design guidelines. In doing so, I became aware of the complicated care system and financial regulation and legislation surrounding this vulnerable target group. I will not be able to solve all the difficulties that this group is facing, but as an architecture student I made it my goal to start from my own field of knowledge and create a design project which can hopefully be an inspiration and motivation to at least start improving their living situation.

The case studies described in the research report and their comparison on the spatial aspects: *typology & form, spatial organisation, outdoor surroundings, embedding* and *facilities* provide clear examples of do's and don'ts within current housing projects. Moreover, the design guidelines that conclude my research can directly be used by architects, or other disciplines that have a say in the spatial organisation of the environment of adults with an MID, to create and design a solid foundation for a supportive neighbourhood for adults with an MID. In addition, my architectural plan reflects a first possible translation of these guidelines in a specific urban context which makes the (academically) written guidelines also readable in images and gives a visual interpretation which hopefully speaks to the imagination of designers or other interested parties that want to improve the living situation of adults with an MID.

My own reflection questions:

6. What is the relevance of this graduation project for me personally as a (future) architect?

I really enjoyed adding to the field of knowledge surrounding more vulnerable target groups and getting in close contact with these users. If I think about the relevance of this graduation work in terms of my own development and positioning, it proved to me that as an architect I need to keep listening and looking closely at the world around me to be able to keep making valuable designs.

Being able to identify what architecture can bring to the table to tackle relevant urgent issues will remain a crucial skill in my professional career, since the field in which architects work deals with ever changing matters. The ability to defend and explain my design choices based on profound research turns an idealistic suggestion into a proper design that will still inspire others but stays grounded at the same time. This is necessary if I actually want my work to be useful and implemented.

7. What is the most valuable thing I learned from this graduation project?

I have learned to think outside the box, to stand before what I believe is right, but being able to convince others and take them along in the process is the only way an architect will be able to make a difference. We can act as a spin in the web, but that only works if we reach out and make sure we stay connected with other fields and practices. Gaining this insight is in my opinion the most valuable about my graduation work, also in the larger social, professional and scientific framework as I will take this approach with me in the future. This way my graduation work will (hopefully) have more impact than the outcome of my research and design project on its own.