Graduation Plan

Master of Science Architecture, Urbanism & Building Sciences

Urbanism Studio

Design of the Urban Fabrics

Graduation Plan: Urbanism Studio – Design of the Urban Fabrics

Personal information	
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Studio		
Name / Theme	AR3U115 Graduation Lab Urbanism Studio – Design of the Urban Fabrics (2021/22)	
Main mentor	Dr.ir. S. C. van der Spek	Urbanism – Urban Design
Second mentor	Dr.ir. G. A. Verschuure-Stuip	Urbanism – Landscape Architecture
Argumentation of choice of the studio	Design of the Urban Fabrics graduation studio focuses on design testing - driven by science and driven by practice – taking place in the framework of scenarios. In my thesis I aim to use design as a method of research and create different scenarios by using a toolbox applicable on a multitude of project locations. Working through the scales, this thesis aims to combine regional problems and local solutions. This fits the Urban Fabrics studio.	

Graduation project	
Title of the graduation project	Religious Heritage as placemaker for rural cores. *A toolbox with urban design implications for revitalization of rural shrinkage areas in the Netherlands by addressing vacant church heritage and the surrounding village's core.*
Goal	
Location:	This thesis focuses on rural shrinkage areas in the Netherlands and especially villages with centrally positioned vacant church heritage. Four project locations have been chosen as a case study. These are Haghorst, North-Brabant; Zwartemeer, Drenthe; Leuth, Gelderland, and Scharredijke, Zeeland.
The posed problem,	By 2050, one in five municipalities in the Netherlands is projected to deal with population decline. The dominant areas prone to shrinkage are located in the periphery of the Netherlands. These regions are mostly the rural parts of the Netherlands. Villages especially deal with population decline. Shrinkage leads to more vacancy, function depletion, and facilities departing in the tangible spectrum. Which in

	turn leads to intangible complications, like a decrease in social interaction, decreased social cohesion, a more limited sense of placeness pride and identity, and as a result a weakened community.

At the same time, the Church has been in steady recession in the Netherlands since the mid-late twentieth century. With a decline in the number of churchgoers and an increasingly diversifying number of denominations, Church communities consist of increasing fewer members. Depillarization, individualization, modernization, and secularization add to this decline. Parishes (Roman-Catholic) and Church communities (Protestant) are fused and accompanying that, usually one or more churches are left abandoned of service, with combined usage of one church in service – leading to an increase of vacant religious heritage. The role of religious buildings in shaping the identity and strengthening the community of towns in the past centuries has been of significant impact. This is especially noticeable with village-churches. Positioned centrally, with a relatively small community surrounding, these churches have always acted as the heart of the village. However, also these village-churches are left out of service and in need of a new prospect. |
| research questions and | The main research question of this thesis aims to combine the two key problems of shrinkage in the rural parts of the Netherlands and the vacancy of religious heritage – focusing on churches – and to create a new opportunity and interest for future spatial planning visions for villages in the Netherlands.

"How can **religious heritage** – together with the **surrounding public space** – as heart of a village stimulate **rural cores** in **shrinkage regions** to increase **livability** and strengthen the **community**?"

In order to answer the main research question, a set of sub-research questions are put forward. These sub-research questions relate to more in-depth analysis and the usage of different methods, they aim to enclose the framework within this thesis is written, and they guard that the resulting product is coherent and contributing to the problem field.

SQ1: How and where does shrinkage occur in the Netherlands?

SQ2: What are the effects of shrinkage and how are these effects perceived by inhabitants and policy makers (municipality/provincial government) of shrinkage regions?

SQ3: What is – and was – the role of the Church and of churches in different denominations in identity and community shaping? |

	SQ4: What is the range of church heritage available (in service, redeveloped, vacant) in the Netherlands and what is the match between vacant village-churches and shrinkage regions? SQ5: What do stakeholders involved envision for the future of 'their' local church? SQ6: How can these threats and opportunities be translated into a structured overview of design implications? SQ7: How can these design implications be applied to case studies?
design assignment in which these result.	This thesis will provide a better understanding of the synthesis of rural shrinkage and vacant religious heritage in a spatial sense. It will also offer a series of possible design interventions on the local scale on rural cores and surrounding the church heritage on the threats and opportunities found in the theoretical and practical research. The result will be two-fold. A comparison between the findings in the literature and the results of interviews form the basis for the design implications. The design implications are to be structured in the form of a toolbox, which is tested on different case studies as a reference. This thesis will prove to be useful for several target groups. First off, this thesis connects the theoretical and practical background on rural shrinkage and in the connection with vacant religious heritage it holds academic value. Secondly, the toolbox can be used as a reference and as an inspiration in future structural development visions for rural municipalities as well as open the conversation on how we should deal with our religious heritage in the future.

Through literature and spatial analysis as well as interviews, this research aims to shine light on the problems of rural shrinkage regions as well as the (former) role of the church within rural communities.

Based on the defined problems and opportunities, design is used as a way to research desirable scenarios and create a comprehensive study on the impact and possibilities in redevelopment of the core of villages, where the former social, symbolical, and functional attributes and values of church buildings are reinvented in a contemporary way.

This all is put together in a structured and accessible way in the form of a toolbox and tested as an example on several case studies. The goal is to not only deliver a thesis which embodies all that has been taught during the past years of this Urbanism master, but also create a lively example of how we, as a society, can rethink the usage of religious heritage. Where this thesis can form as an inspiration and reference for others.

Process
Method description, and Literature and general practical preference

In researching and answering the main research question, a series of different research methods will be used. The sub-research questions are designed to provoke the use of a variety of methods and aim to cover all aspects of the research statement. The sub-research questions are therefore closely linked with the different methods used and each require a different approach of using a mix of methods. The methods are divided into two groups, deductive methods and inductive methods (marked with the letter 'D' for deductive or the letter 'I' for inductive, as well as a corresponding color for a clear distinction). Deductive methods aim to derive at a conclusion by reasoning and build upon available knowledge on the subject, where the facts of the conclusion are guaranteed by the facts of the knowledge used. The deductive methods can be both qualitative as well as quantitative. Inductive methods are founded on the aspect of probability and are based on observations. The inductive methods are qualitative.

Deductive
M-D1: Research by Literature
Research by literature is a qualitative method. On both the subjects of rural shrinkage as religious heritage there is a large quantity of literature available. The literature forms the backbone of all other research and analysis methods, and it provides the basis for the key findings. Sources for the literature are derived from WorldCat Library Catalog; Elsevier; TU Delft Architecture Library, and research platforms by other Dutch universities as well as research platforms provided by the Dutch government.

M-D2: Data Analysis
The data analysis is a quantitative method. The findings from the literature can be tested and proven against the defined data acquired on the subject relevant to this study. Sources for the data are derived from research and data platforms provided by the Dutch government (CBS, PBL, RCE).

M-D3: Spatial Analysis
The spatial analysis is a quantitative method. With the spatial analysis, the dimension of location is added. Differences based on place can be derived and compared. Sources for the data are derived from GIS databases provided by the Dutch government, as well as OpenStreetMap, and RCE datasets.

M-D4: Historic Analysis
The Historic analysis is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Using the term 'Historic analysis' as a shared denominator, data and timelines on growth and shrinkage patterns through the ages on specific locations will be looked at, as well as looking at the more qualitative 'soft' side of history – the experiences and stories accompanying these patterns. Sources for the data are derived from literature as well as TopoTijdreis.

Inductive

M-I1: Research by Fieldwork
Fieldwork is arguably one of the most important methods. Being a qualitative method, fieldwork provides with observations and findings on the 3D real-life environment. As opposed to the on-paper methods previously mentioned. Research techniques are based on the introductory intensive courses at the start of the academic year.

M-I2: Research by Interview
Interviews are also a qualitative method. Interviews are a closed way of conversation and interviews with different stakeholders are comparable reciprocally and they are comparable with the deductive findings. Research techniques are based on the introductory intensive courses at the start of the academic year. Involved parties are the Cultural Heritage Agency (RCE), several design bureaus involved with redevelopment of religious heritage, several municipalities, and stakeholders involved with specific church heritage such as the church board and local redevelopment teams.

M-I3: Research by Conversation
Research by conversation is, just like the research by interview, a qualitative method. In contrast to the more scripted and structured research by interview, research by conversation is more open and non-directive. Although no hard data can be gathered by these open conversations, they provide excellent guidance in finding the right sources and methods for other aspects of the research. Research techniques are based on the introductory intensive courses at the start of the academic year.
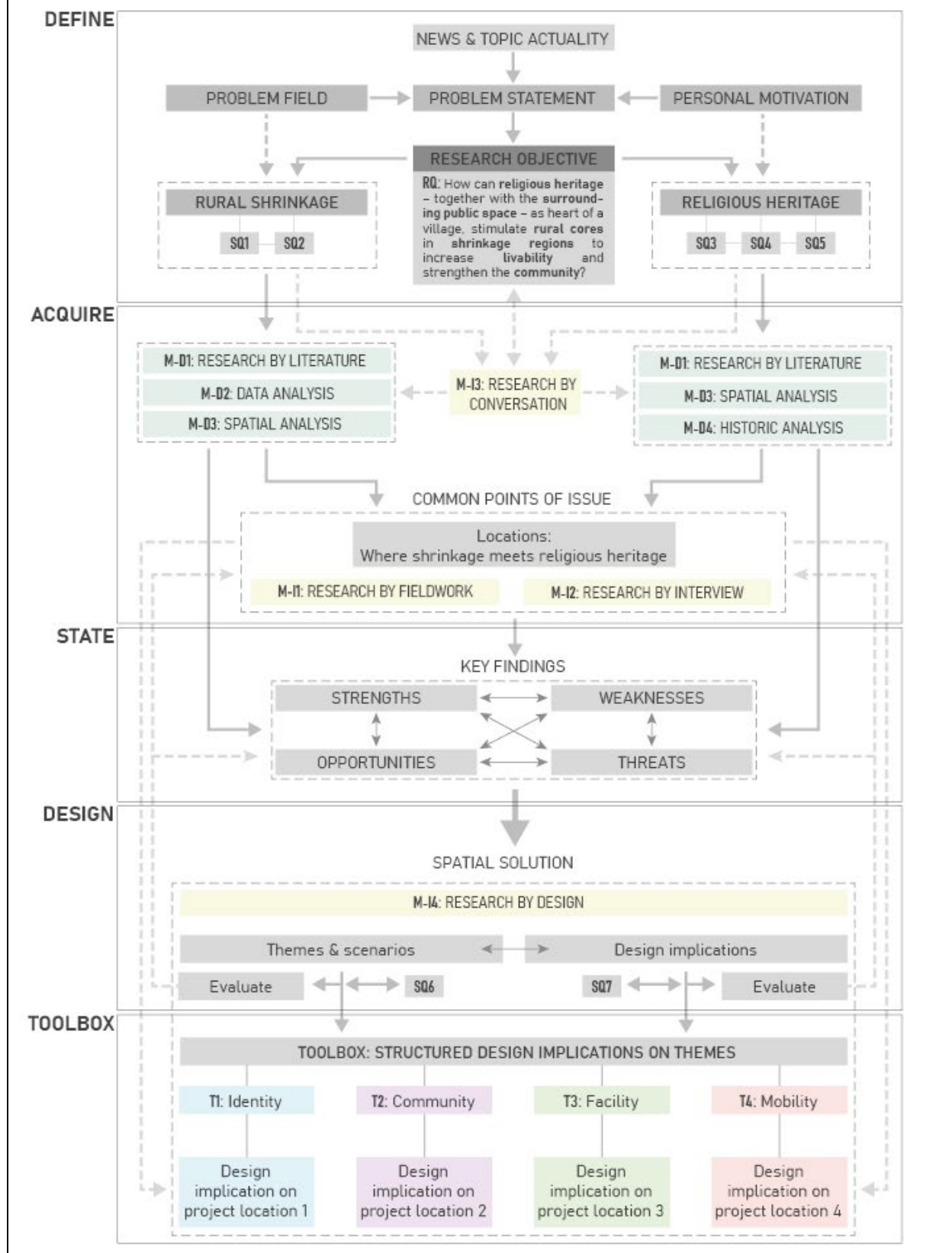
M-I4: Research by Design
Finally, research by design. As a qualitative method, research by design aims to combine all the findings of the previous methods and provide a beckoning design perspective as result. Research techniques are based on the past years of experience during studying at the department of Urbanism.

Methodological Framework
The time available for this thesis project is different from previous years of Urbanism graduation projects, due to a series of Intensives courses during the first quarter of the academic year. This quarter is concluded with an orientating P1, while P2 focusses on the methodological approach of the project.

The time planning is roughly divided into the five stages previously mentioned in the methodological framework. Currently, at P2, the first two stages, Define and Acquire, are almost completed. The research done – on literature, spatial analysis, data analysis, and historic analysis – is focused on the general context of rural shrinkage and vacancy in religious heritage. During the second stage of research – by fieldwork and by interviews – a more zoomed in approach will be taken, focusing on the four to be defined project locations which will act as case studies to test the findings of the first research stage to. The result of these two stages of research will be translated to the design implications and, in structured/schematic form, displayed in the toolbox.

The final work will be put in the toolbox and bringing everything together. During this final stage, the design implications – along the four themes of Identity, Community, Facility, and Mobility – will be tested to four project locations suited with each of the themes.

Reflection

The topic of this graduation year of the Urban Fabrics graduation studio is 'At Home', questioning how the future city will look like. This thesis takes the themes of social problems in shrinkage regions and the base of social cohesion and applies it to villages – as an alternative to cities. The societal problems resulting from shrinkage will be analyzed in-depth and a spatial solution in the form of urban design implications will be given in line with this Urbanism master-track. Finally, this thesis aims to design the built environment in a way to stimulate a sustainable, accessible, and livable environment with an eye on human scale and with a heart for the local communities involved. With the final design implications put together in a toolbox which can be applied to project locations, this thesis finalizes in all that was taught during the master program.

The societal relevance of this thesis relates to the urgency of the two key problems at hand. Shrinkage is an inevitable phenomenon has a lasting impact on the livability of regions which have to deal with this problem. At the same time, a growing availability of religious heritage and lacking vision on how to deal with this heritage leads to vacancy. This thesis therefore deals with providing a better livable environment as well as retaining and strengthening both tangible and intangible heritage.

The scientific relevance of this thesis leads to the way the two key problems are combined. There is a lot of literature available on both the subject of shrinkage as well as the subject of Church decline and vacancy in religious heritage. However, the spatial combination of shrinkage regions and vacancy in religious heritage has not been looked at before and may provide an interesting new view on the subject. As well as the final product of the design toolbox, which may function as a reference in structural visions of villages and their churches in the future.

This thesis also offers an interesting approach to the topic of redeveloping religious heritage. The past years a focus has been put by the Cultural Heritage Agency (part of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science) to stimulate municipalities to work on a structural vision on how to deal with their religious heritage called a 'Kerkenvisie'. In this structural vision the municipality and church boards work together to take position on which religious heritage will be kept in religious service and which heritage will not and what could be an alternative use for the buildings left out of service. However, the approach is decided by a dedicated team set up by the municipality and the church boards and offers little participation by local residents. The approach of this thesis is the other way around: this thesis starts off with societal problems in these rural settlements and the public perception on these problems and work from there on how the church heritage can fulfill in facilitating solutions, just like churches have been doing through the past centuries. The aim is to truly reconcile churches and the local community again.

The thesis links to two of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) set by the United Nations. Goal 8 and Goal 11. Goal 8 promotes sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, and full and productive employment and decent work for all. And Goal 11 aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.