

Reflection

Introduction

In this paper I will reflect on my graduation project up until P4. Exploring various facets of the research and project: how they relate to each other, the methodology chosen, how they relate to the field of architecture as a whole, and ethical implications surrounding this graduation project. This reflection aims to be engaged with my graduation project and better understand my own process as a designer.

Within ExploreLab each student works from their unique fascination. My fascination was Trans identities and their relationship with architecture and the built environment. This topic of relationality is one that has constantly come up during my studies. Often finding myself drawn to, and playing with the relationship between objects, buildings, cities, and people and how architecture as a medium can alter these relationships. Furthermore, by understanding architecture as a cultural text which can be interpreted by each individual user a deeper understanding of the relationship between user and space can happen. This forms the basis of my fascination and exploration of Trans identities in architecture.

ExploreLab is loosely divided into two parts: research and design each lasting a semester. The research phase was further divided into three segments: literature review, interviews, and processing of the interviews. During the research phase it became clear that two project locations would be needed to fully test, and understand the approach and to further tease out the general and specific elements of this approach. A project location in the city centre of Den Haag, Netherlands and one in Ngara West, Nairobi, Kenya were chosen. Two countries with large differences in social acceptance of Trans individuals and Legal rights.

the relationship between research and design

The research report created a framework for the design phase. This framework comprised of two elements. Firstly this concept of Trans 'Phases' that act on the building. Meaning that the buildings internally will react to the needs of the inhabitants and externally react to the acceptability of Trans identities within the wider social context. This external and internal transitioning was developed to react to the transition that the inhabitants of the building are going through and the transition that society at large is going through.

The second element comprised of community building, within the residents of the building, the local Trans community, and the global Trans community.

These two elements were instrumental in choosing the location, layout of the building, façade design, and detailing. The locations were chosen allowing for multiple ways of entering the building, and allowing the building to shift from one street to the other. The façade in both projects is designed to allow residents to be able to change how on display they are, how open they are towards themselves, their community, and the world at large.

The choice of two project locations was deliberately chosen to better understand the generic and specific elements of this design process. This graduation project interprets, designs and reinterprets these two locations through a Trans lens through a mythological approach focusing on the experiential aspects of architectural design.

Elaboration on research method and approach chosen by the student in relation to the graduation studio methodical line of inquiry, reflecting thereby upon the scientific relevance of the work.

Interviews were done with Queer, Trans, and Non-Binary folk using word association, and semi structured open-ended questions. The interview focused on Trans related experiences surround architecture. Topics such as bathrooms, mental safety maps, Trans experiences within a given space, Gender dysphoria or euphoria inducing spaces, privacy among others were discussed. The focus of the interview was on the impact of architecture on Trans experiences. Architecture as a medium for protection, prosecution, respite, and politics were furthermore discussed. All the interviewees had no expertise in architecture to allow for a first-hand account of these experiences. This form of interviewing allows the interviewees to have a high degree of freedom to lead and steer the conversations. This freedom allows interviewees to feel comfortable in the topic being discussed.

Interviews were done with interviewees in 4 countries, Kenya, India, The Netherlands, and Belgium. Although a sample size of 5 was very small the interviews were in-depth, taking 1-2 hours per interviewee. Furthermore, by having interviewees from a wide range of socio-economic and geographic backgrounds, the research could better understand what experiences were generalized, like bathrooms, and which were geography specific, Cubbon Park.

The interviews were further processed and expanded on through plan analysis and a series of papers. These helped illustrate common themes, spatial components, and relationships with other fields of study. As the interviews focused almost exclusively on subjective experiences extra data was collected through literature review focusing on themes like rates of suicide and homelessness, life expectancy, and housing for Trans populations. This was needed to better contextualise the interviews.

The final report was presented as a website with an editorial page as the homepage and below this a collection of pages with individual papers and plan analyses. This format was chosen to present the information in a non-hierarchical form in which readers could make new connections between various elements that make up the research report. Furthermore, a website also made it easier for interview participants to comment on the work and disseminate it how they wished too.

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

This project follows in the footsteps of feminist, post-colonial, and queer writers such as Doreen Massey, Dianne Harris, and Lucas Crawford and many others. Asking questions around the topic of identity and architectural experience. Further understanding how people interpret, use, and understand architecture and the built environment is incredibly important, both in academia and practice. Creating frameworks and methodologies to better equip architects to better design for marginalized people is important. Creating architecture that keeps all people safe, comfortable, and happy allows architecture as a field to better serve humanity.

Furthermore, the act of giving space to marginalized communities, formalizing their existence as part of an urban framework allows those communities to better come together and fight for their rights within often hostile societies.

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

Many ethical issues came up during both the research and design phases of the project. As the project focuses on marginalized people and the interviews focused on personal experiences that can

often be uncomfortable or even traumatic it was important that the interviewees felt comfortable and safe during and after the interviews. Researching marginalized communities, especially when the researchers are not part of the community, is fraught with ethical dilemmas. During the interviews time was taken to also expand on my own identity and relationship with Queer and Trans communities. Furthermore, the interview followed the NHS guidelines and best practices.¹ Trans people are often medicalized in research, this research project aimed to combat this by clearly focusing on personal experiences and moving away from the surgical and pharmaceutical parts of Trans identities. A document shared with all the interview participants clearly outlines how the data would be used, stored, and disseminated. Interview participants were asked before the presentation to agree to all the clauses they were comfortable with and a discussion was had before commencing about their comfort, describing any triggering questions I may pose, and if any parts of their experience was off limits to be asked about. Furthermore, the semi-structured nature of the interview allowed participants to steer the conversation to where they felt comfortable. Follow up chats were had to discuss the research outcomes and the research report was sent to participants before submission. All data was anonymised to protect the participants privacy.

During the design phase questions around safety standards, often lacking in Kenya, needed to be addressed. Constructions in Kenya do fail and lives have been lost because of this. While keeping in mind the economic situation in Kenya ensuring that the building would be a strong, safe, stable, and healthy environment was important. During the design process Dutch standards (where applicable) were used to ensure this.

Both projects, by their very nature, are designed to keep marginalized users safe and comfortable while being in the project. For this privacy, sightlines, noise, and safety were key factors addressed in the design. Adding walls, privacy elements, and making sure that users could not be seen or overheard (unless they explicitly wanted to) was part of the design process from the ground up.

¹ Nick Fox, 'Using Interviews in a Research Project' (NHS, 2009), https://www.rds-yh.nihr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/15_Using-Interviews-2009.pdf.