

Reflection

As part of the Master Thesis 'Rebuilding Trust: Housing Associations in Groningen's Reinforcement Task'

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Reflection questions posed by the Board of Examiners

What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track and your master programme?

My thesis explores the role of housing associations in Groningen's reinforcement task. I think this is an unique topic within my master track Management in the Built Environment (MBE), further elucidating the relation between my graduation project topic and my master track in this reflection seems only fair. The idea to do something with the earthquake problem arose in week 1, when I was reading about the various possible graduation themes within MBE. Beforehand, 6 different themes were established, that you could read up on. In the reading list of theme 6: 'tackling housing inequality', I came across an article about the impact of earthquakes in Groningen on the intention to move. As I grew up in Groningen, this struck a chord with me. I was immediately inspired to do something with the earthquakes in my graduation topic and signed up for theme 6.

Of course, this needed to be further delineated. The dossier is so extensive that it's already a challenging choice to make it your graduation topic. Since theme 6 was called 'tackling housing inequalities', my reasoning started from here. In Groningen, inequality has always been noticeable. Originally, the most often discussed differences were between the northern provinces and the busy Randstad area. But there have also been long-standing divisions between the city of Groningen and its surrounding province (the 'stad en ommeland' discussion). The earthquakes only brought forth a new set of inequalities to the province, namely: the differences between people with and people without earthquake damage to their homes. But even within the category of people with earthquake damage, large inequalities exist in how damage is addressed. Differences occur between neighbours, tenants and homeowners. Groningen has - both literally and figuratively - become a fractured province.

These inequalities fascinated me. Especially the 'newfound' inequalities within the category of people with earthquake damage to their homes. I observed a pronounced emphasis on homeowners in the discourse surrounding the earthquake issue, while housing associations and tenants seemed to receive less attention. This became particularly striking when I discovered that 30% of the homes needing reinforcement are owned by housing associations. If almost 1/3rd of the reinforcement task falls under their responsibility, then why don't we hear or see anything about them? This inspired me to dedicate my thesis to investigating the role of housing associations in Groningen's reinforcement task.

Considering the broad perspective of MBE, there were numerous other options I could have chosen to explore within the earthquake dossier, such as analysing the impact of earthquakes on property values, investigating temporary housing solutions, or focusing on integrating sustainability measures within reinforcement efforts. However, I found less immediate motivation for research in these areas. Besides, I was already inclined towards investigating inequalities. And the perspective of housing associations aligns seamlessly with the program of MBE as well. Another crucial decision I made in shaping my graduation topic was to broaden my focus beyond the material damage caused by earthquakes to encompass the immaterial damage and the issue of liveability. In doing so, I contribute to the broader discourse on the role of housing associations. The ultimate outcome of my graduation project, a step-by-step guide for area-based development, aligns with MBE's objective of developing comprehensive solutions for development and management of buildings, portfolios, and urban areas.

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

My research has evolved over time. This is because, logically, you don't know everything beforehand. Also, you have both supervisors from TU Delft and supervisors from your internship who occasionally steer you onto a new path. A crucial point in my research occurred when, towards the end of my literature review, I discovered that there was no measurement instrument available for liveability in the earthquake-affected area. Let alone specifically tailored to tenants. How could I write a thesis about strategies that housing associations could employ to enhance liveability if I had no idea about the current state of liveability in the area?

At this crucial point in the research process (moving from theory to practice), it seemed necessary for me to develop a liveability measurement tool. I incorporated this step into my research design and made an attempt. Aedes, the Dutch federation of housing associations, actually provides very interesting documents and guidelines on liveability, including one literal blueprint with building blocks for housing associations to assemble a liveability measurement tool. However, after making an initial attempt, I soon realized that it would require way too much time and would not yield reliable results. I had to come up with an alternative approach. Fortunately, around the same time, I started my internship at Kr8. I discovered that the housing associations had encountered the same problem and had attempted to solve it by distributing a questionnaire among their tenants. This questionnaire sounded like the missing puzzle piece I needed to bring my research forward. When I gained access to the questionnaires, they turned out to be slightly less comprehensive than I had hoped. But; they were comprehensive enough to paint a picture of the liveability issues at play in the area. I added the data analysis of the questionnaires to my research plan and picked up the thread.

Attached to the questionnaires was a policy document, titled the 'Woonactieplan', that outlined the strategies proposed by housing associations to address the challenges and enhance liveability. Naturally, I positioned this document as the focal point of my thesis, as it aligned seamlessly with my primary research question. However, while conducting a document analysis, I found that the Woonactieplan was less concrete or developed than I had hoped. Throughout the process, I often questioned whether it was the right decision to give such prominence to this evolving document in my research. However, it wasn't until later that I realized the valuable insights that an incomplete document can offer. It prompts reflection on why it remains incomplete, the challenges it faces, the motivations driving its development, and potential pathways for its advancement. It wasn't until the very end of my research journey that I grasped the true significance of the Woonactieplan as a dynamic process rather than a static product. This realization prompted me to revise my conclusions and recommendations.

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

In evaluating the value of my approach and methodology, I find them to be both effective and comprehensive (see figure 1). The incorporation of qualitative and quantitative research methods in a mixed-method approach facilitated a nuanced exploration of the subject matter. Employing various research methods, including a thorough literature review, explorative talks, data and document analysis, and a focus group, allowed for a multifaceted investigation from diverse perspectives. The extensive data analysis, involving the review of 263 questionnaires, enhanced the reliability of the findings. Additionally, engaging with over 30 experts through

explorative talks and the focus group enriched the research process by providing valuable insights and perspectives.

Sub-question/method	Literature review	Explorative talks	Data analysis	Document analysis	Focus group
1. What is the current state of the earthquake problem in Groningen, including its key characteristics and impact?	X				
2. How is the role of housing associations defined within the framework of the Dutch Housing Act?	X				
3. How is liveability defined in existing literature, and what are the prevailing management strategies outlined to enhance it?	X				
4. How does the earthquake problem in Groningen affect the operations of housing associations, and what perspectives do they hold regarding their role in addressing the issues?		X			
5. What earthquake-related liveability challenges do tenants in Groningen encounter and what are their expressed needs and wishes?			X		
6. What strategies to enhance liveability are delineated by the Kr8 associations in the Woonactieplan and how do these align with the findings of the survey?				X	
7. What is the current status of the Woonactieplan and what is the preferred course of action?					X

Figure 1: method used per sub-question (own work).

If given the opportunity to revisit my methodology, I would consider conducting in-depth interviews from the outset instead of explorative talks. What initially held me back from doing this was the feeling that I didn't possess sufficient knowledge to conduct an interview. The explorative talks were really meant to facilitate the transition from literature study to the more practical part of my research process. At the outset of my internship, my primary objective was to validate the accuracy of my understanding regarding the dossier and the roles of all stakeholders involved. While the explorative talks proved highly valuable in this regard, their informal nature may detract from their overall solidity when compared to other research methods. Moreover, the presence of inconsistencies in execution, including variations in recording and transcription methods, as well as disparities in informed consent procedures, raises legitimate concerns regarding the reliability and rigor of this approach.

One lingering doubt I have about my research is the absence of direct engagement with tenants, despite their pivotal role in shaping the research focus. I made the decision not to involve them directly due to the sensitive nature of the topic in Groningen. Several people warned me that residents in Groningen are already 'surveyed to death' and generally aren't keen on another researcher asking them questions about the impact of the earthquakes. It seemed like a better option to use questionnaires to gain insight into their lived experiences. And I must say, in the end, I believe this approach turned out well. While there might have been some oversight in the data analysis, I'm confident that I grasped the overall sentiment effectively. Moreover, I had the opportunity to interact with tenants on several occasions, including meetings of the HPAG, where I believe I also gained valuable insights.

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

Firstly, the academic value. I believe I identified a clear gap in knowledge in the extensive literature on the earthquake issue in Groningen and effectively addressed it with my research. By focusing on the role of housing associations, I have contributed valuable insights to the scholarly conversation. Not only does my research offer a fresh perspective, but it also distinguishes itself from previous studies on the Groningen earthquake problem in terms of structure and design. The integration of multiple spheres - earthquake impact, housing associations' roles, and strategies for enhancing liveability (see figure 2) - in the literature review, alongside the utilization of a mixed-methods approach, has proven to be a valuable blend. This approach holds the potential to establish a framework for future studies in similar contexts.

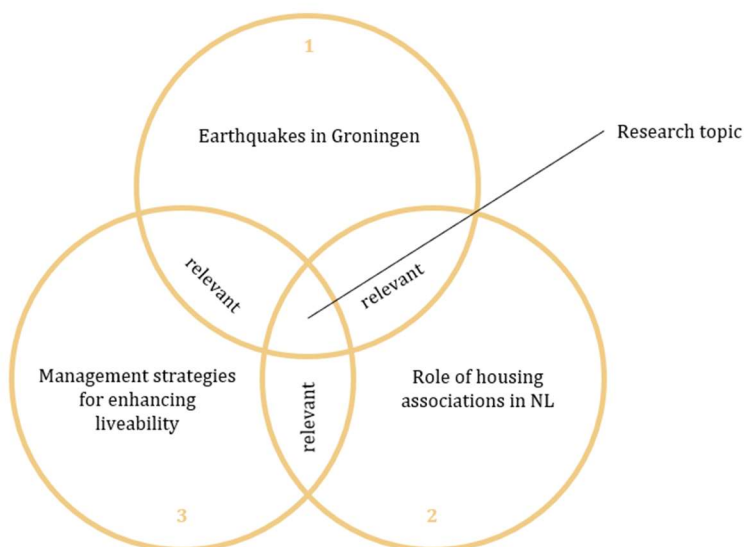


Figure 2: the three pivotal elements of this research (own work).

When considering its societal value, I believe my thesis holds considerable social relevance due to its impact on people's lives. The significance of this work is further underscored by its alignment with recent events, such as the parliamentary inquiry into gas extraction in Groningen and the impending closure of the gas tap in 2024, rendering it both timely and practically significant for addressing the challenges encountered by communities affected by earthquakes. From a professional standpoint, this research has the potential to provide valuable insights to housing associations, policymakers, and stakeholders tasked with managing comparable crises or addressing liveability issues following natural disasters.

Ethically, it is crucial to acknowledge the responsibility inherent in conducting research that directly impacts communities. Throughout the research process, ethical considerations, such as ensuring informed consent, protecting the privacy and dignity of participants, and mitigating potential harm, were prioritized. Additionally, the dissemination of findings will be carried out responsibly, with an emphasis on transparency, accuracy, and accessibility, to ensure that the outcomes are utilized ethically and for the benefit of all stakeholders involved.

How do you assess the transferability of your project results?

Although earthquakes are not a concern in other parts of the Netherlands, the knowledge acquired from my research transcends the specific context of Groningen. Specifically, the exploration of housing associations' involvement in enhancing liveability resonates on a national scale. By elucidating how housing associations can effectively contribute to enhancing liveability within their communities, my research offers valuable insights applicable to diverse settings across the Netherlands.

Personal reflection questions

How do I assess the entire thesis process upon reflection?

Let me begin by saying that the process has been much smoother than I had anticipated beforehand. I have surprised myself with my steadfastness and stability. What I believe has helped is that this was my second time conducting a master thesis, that I knew very early on what I wanted to do, that I was fortunate enough to connect with the right people, and that I had the opportunity to combine my graduation project with an internship at Kr8. The internship greatly propelled my progress. Firstly, because I could concentrate much better in the office than at home, allowing me to be effectively engaged in my thesis at least 3 days a week. In addition, it allowed me to be much closer to the subject matter. By keeping my eyes and ears open, I was able to observe and hear a lot while at the office. Perhaps the biggest pre of the internship was that I got access to the network of Kr8. This made it considerably easier for me to organize explorative talks and a focus group. Both Peter and Geja dedicated a lot of time and effort to introduce me to everybody.

The flip side of an internship is the risk of assimilating too deeply into the organizational culture and becoming 'one of them'. As I spent a lot of time at the office and developed close relationships with my colleagues, it became increasingly tempting to adopt their perspectives or readily accept their information as the truth. I found myself structuring chapters in a predominantly descriptive manner, rather than critically analysing them in relation to existing literature or offering my own insights. Harry and Marja had to remind me multiple times during my internship to maintain my stance as a critical researcher. 'What does Maaïke think about this?' is what they would ask.

I greatly appreciate the way they guided me throughout this process. They consistently offered insightful points regarding the content of my research, and each suggested adjustment invariably enhanced it. What's important is that they presented their feedback in a highly constructive manner, which never left me feeling disheartened after a session. They were incredibly supportive. Moreover, they also paid attention to me as an individual. I am quite the perfectionist, who tends to put too much pressure on herself. Harry and Marja were quick to

figure this out, and regularly reminded me to also enjoy the journey of graduation, emphasizing that it should be fun and that it's 'just a master's thesis'. Their guidance made me realize that it's perfectly fine if my thesis doesn't advance every single day. Everyone experiences days when things just don't work out. Sometimes, you need to give yourself a little space in order to move forward.

To what extent have I achieved my predefined personal study targets?

At the start of the graduation process, I defined 8 personal study targets. In the figure below, these study targets are depicted, along with my own assessment of to what extent I have achieved them. The maximum achievement is 5 stars.

Personal study target	Level of achievement
1. To establish a profound understanding of the research area and effectively integrate the study into the broader context of existing research.	★★★★★ (5/5)
2. To design and conduct original research that makes a significant contribution to the field, generating new insights, theories, or practical recommendations.	★★★★★ (5/5)
3. To develop the ability to critically evaluate and analyse research findings and their implications, considering alternative interpretations and potential limitations of the study.	★★★ (3/5)
4. To effectively manage time by setting clear goals and deadlines, ensuring timely progress and completion of the thesis.	★★★★★ (5/5)
5. To acquire proficiency in employing a diverse range of research methods and effectively integrating them to address multifaceted research questions.	★★★★★ (5/5)
6. To develop the competence to conduct research with ethical integrity and to adhere to ethical guidelines, especially when dealing with human subjects or sensitive data.	★★★★ (4/5)
7. To produce a high-quality thesis document that reflects the research journey and meets academic standards.	★★★★★ (5/5)
8. To gain practical experience and insights through an internship with Kr8, allowing for the application of research findings to real-world situations and enhancing the ability to bridge the gap between academia and practical solutions.	★★★★★ (5/5)

Figure 3: level of achievement per personal study target (own work).

Looking back, I feel confident that I have achieved target 1, as I have gained a deep understanding of the complex earthquake dossier. Additionally, I believe I have contributed something original that can benefit Kr8, aligning with target 2. However, I acknowledge that I still have room for improvement in critical writing, hence my rating of 3 out of 5 stars for target 3. On a positive note, target 4 is a success; I have demonstrated strong planning skills by staying on track during the entire process. Target 5 deserves a full 5 stars as well, as I have effectively utilized a variety of methods. Unfortunately, target 6 falls slightly short due to some inconsistencies in the explorative talks and data management. Nonetheless, I'm pleased to have produced a complete final report and to have gained valuable insights during my internship, earning a 5 out of 5 score for the last two targets.