

# REFLECTION PAPER

On the graduation project

Redefining the identity of the Ring A10



Author: Magdalena Nalepa, Student Number: 4510216

Main Mentor: Dr.ir. Olindo Caso, Second Mentor: Ir. Hubert van der Meel

Research Mentor: Dr. ir. Franklin van der Hoeven

Explore Lab 23, October 2017

*The aim of this paper is to reflect upon my graduation design process, focusing on few main aspects such as the research methodology, the development of my own topic within the studio and the relevance of the project in the wider context. This is done by first describing the specific aspect, analyzing it and finally reflecting upon it. It will result in the conclusions on what I have already learnt during the graduation and what should be taken into account in my future career as an architect.*

## **Project description: Redefining the identity of the Ring A10**

The project found its base in my personal fascination – The Ringroad A10 in Amsterdam, as an example of specific phenomenon of the relationship between the human and the highway. It found its parlance as “the ring” and started being used in everyday conversations. When someone wants to know where you live, the question asked is “Within or outside the ring?” (in dutch: “Binnen of buiten de ring?” ) In that case, the highway became a border between supposedly two different worlds. At the same time, being characterized by its nothingness, such huge infrastructural element becomes a forgotten land. Therefore, the project is an attempt to redefine the identity of the ring A10 in Amsterdam focusing on its role in the city now and its potential in the future. The aim of the project is to bring the Ring A10 back to the city and the citizens, by transforming it into a multifunctional place of its own identity. It is to create the layer of “In the ring” between “the within” and “the outside” on the map of Amsterdam. Even though the proposal can be seen as a theoretical discourse on the perception of the space and its role in creating identity, it also tries to answer the general questions of urban renovation and social activation. The project – The Art Center Kunstwerk built within the infrastructure is a house where civil work meets art. Those two, assumingly contrasting worlds, coexist in symbiosis. They benefit from each other’s qualities, creating a dynamic environment that stimulates perception. The processes of creating art happening within the borders of the ring, connect people of all ages and origins. The Kunstwerk Ring A10 becomes a safe ground for people from both the within the ring and the outside.

## **Relevance – The good the bad and the ugly**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the use of automobile gained popularity, the new system of the road – the highway – was developed as an answer for the increasing need for the fast movement. Since then, roads have been considered as an infrastructural element in the city, having one, strictly functional purpose – a place to move from A to B. Its evaluation has mostly been done through numbers indicating its capacity and logistics. Even though the size and the physical structure of the highway is disassociated with the human scale, its impact on the citizens and the city life seems to be apparent in many urban developments. Amsterdam is one of the places where this phenomenon occurs. It seems that the Ringroad even when serving one purpose, plays many roles in the city. It is an edge of Amsterdam Noord, it marks the urban development in the west and undoubtedly it is a physical barrier that cuts urban tissue. Its “multilayeriness” became deeply rooted in people’s minds having impact on their lives. Nevertheless even in the speculations on the role of the highways in the city, the human seems to be overlooked and the space keeps its one purpose. In my opinion, in order to be able to find a proper place for the infrastructure in the city, the strong focus on the citizen is needed and the relationship should be re-established.

## **The relationship between the theme of the graduation lab and the subject**

As an explore lab student, I was free to choose my own graduation topic based on my personal fascination. I was also responsible to create my graduation team of tutors. During first 6 weeks I have been discussing my fascination theme with the teachers of the Faculty of Architecture, considering possible collaboration.

This intense time had a big impact on the further design process. First of all it allowed to discuss the ideas with different teachers. Each of the meetings had its own specific educational value. It also allowed me to get to know different approaches and made me think in which direction my project should go. If it comes to the specificity of the Explore Lab Studio, it provides a lot of independency and freedom. Such model of a graduation studio gives the best preparation for the real work as an architect. The fact that we had to create our tutor team allowed me to set a group of professionals from different disciplines (Chair of Research and urban designer Dr. ir. Franklin van der Hoeven, research oriented Complex Projects teacher Dr. ir. Olindo Caso and the BuildingTechnology teacher fascinated with the phenomenology of architecture Ir. Hubert van Meel) Such a multidisciplinary group requires good communication skills and an open mind. Moreover, it thought me to be able to discuss the design issues with each tutor in a way to fully benefit from the collaboration. It also developed my confidence and ability to clearly express my ideas.

## **Methodology and relationship with the ongoing research**

Recently the development of technology shows potential in reweaving the highway and the city. The studies have been made by BNA in collaboration with Delft University of Technology and dutch architects in order to propose a new method of connecting the highways with the city. Even though the proposed solutions seem to merge technological development and the needs of the city, it gives impression that there is still a crucial element missing – the citizen. Having already known, that the link between the human and the highway exists in Amsterdam, my intention was to contribute to the ongoing research by analysing the relationship from the human perspective. It studied the identity of the area within the Ringroad A10 in Amsterdam, the outer side and the space of the highway itself. It was done by focusing on the collective memory and personal experiences of the citizens of Amsterdam.

In the research, diverse methods and tools were combined to tackle different aspects of human perception. In the first part – the urban scale studies focused on the perception understood as – memories, feelings, personal experiences combined with the reputation of a place. This was done by using the “sensitizing workbooks” and personal interviews. The books with the assignments triggered respondents to think more about the research issue which led to interesting discussions on the Ring A10 that wouldn’t happen otherwise. The second part – district scale, studied the virtual identity of a place. That was done by analysing the way how the adjacent neighbourhoods and the Ring A10 were presented online at the pictures posted on websites such as Instagram or Flickr. This was extended by analysis of the hashtags. Surprisingly the hashtags seemed to be powerful in the process of creating identity of a place. It plays important role by emphasizing the differences of the sides and promoting the RingA10 adding an artistic layer to the concrete infrastructure. Finally, the third part of the research concentrated on the local scale and the sensorial experiences of a human with a particular focus on the sense of sight, sense of hearing, sense of touching and sense of smell. That was done through the sensewalks organized at the underpasses of the ring A10. It resulted in the unexpected findings that the underpasses are overwhelmingly senseless (quiet, dark)

The chosen methodology seemed to give an invaluable insight in the existing mental image of Amsterdam. That would not be possible conducting a hard – tools research. The methods I used, allowed me to gather very personal, qualitative data. Therefore it presents results which may or may not have much in common with the objective reality of the situation. This directed the graduation project even more in the personal, human experience – based design. At the same time, I am aware of the fact that by directing the focus on the user's perception, the project shifted into theoretical discourse on placemaking and social activation through architecture. Hence, I consciously chose to disregard some aspects that would be crucial in the real, feasible project (e.g. costs of the project)

## **The relationship between the research and the design.**

In the qualitative research I have conducted, I learned The ringroad is simply regarded as noone's, being left in between "the within" and "the outside" lacking specific identity. The sides within the ring and the outside are perceived as different (sometimes contradictory) but the ring itself does not cause this difference. Therefore my design approach that I had in mind before the research had to be adjusted. My project proposal instead of trying to fade the differences and stitch the city back (which would result in another grey zone), strives for uniqueness and focuses on the potential of the ring in order to create a place that affirm its presence in the city.

In this point Architecture played crucial role in recreating the identity of the ring as the visual and programmatic unity. Here I posed myself few questions in order to understand which direction to choose and which architectural tools to use in the placemaking process in order to reach the significance of place for its users.

1. Is it about the fact that the ring does not offer any experience to the citizens?
2. Is it about the fact that the ring is visually a non-place?
3. Should placemaking project be just about providing experience?
4. Is it possible to "make a place" just by building it?
5. Which of these two has more power in redefining the identity of the Ring A10?

This phase seemed to be the most difficult in the whole design process. However, by jumping back and forth between the research and design I was able to make the substantiated choice and proceed with the design. The research conclusions confirmed that the identity of the sides was recognized mostly by their visual characteristics related to the architectural aspects. This is why the physical qualities gained special focus in the design process and were emphasized in the design proposal.

After the initial research that aimed to be the extension of the existing research "Highway and the City", the special interest in the personal visual experience has been continued throughout the whole design. I implemented the design through research and the research through design to stimulate the creative process. First, I have organize workshops on symbolic representation of ideas. Inviting people in the design process was necessary to avoid subjectivity of one mind of the designer. During the workshop session, participants were asked to translate the chosen notions into visuals using typical architectural drawings such as plans sections and elevation drawings. The analysis of them took a long time because it required looking at each proposal individually, simultaneously trying to find a common pattern in all the drawings. It occurred to be a turning point in the design process. It led to forming a specific design strategy consisted of 4 principles that gave directions to any further design decision. Each of them even though having clear aim, derived from the additional investigation including making abstract models, physical models

of different qualities and real 1:1 scale material tests. By doing this I fully explored the tools of architecture and its power in creating identity and stimulating perception.

The process seemed to be time-consuming, that resulted in postponing of the graduation but also strengthened my architectural skills. The research driven design made the project more academic and prevented it from being based strictly on the personal preferences. The research through design extended my architectural awareness of possibilities and developed the skill of making substantiated decisions. Even though it was the first time I have implemented these techniques in the design process, I have learned they are beneficial for both the process and the final design proposal. The combination of the participatory design, form studies through model making and abstraction undoubtedly leads to a more complete design.

## **Final reflections**

In the design I have tried to complement the relationship between the highway and the city by focusing on the human. I have also realized that the design process was completed by the participation of many people. I believe that in every design process those three – the creativity, the research through design and design through research and the participation is needed in order to come up with a successful proposal.

Here I would like to underline the significance of the participatory layer that gave the whole design a shining coating. Starting with all the participants of the research who opened my eyes to see the phenomenon of the Ring A10 and get to know the actual perception of it. Continuing with the participants of the workshops and everyone taking part in model building process thanks to whom I kept on questioning the human scale of the design and never forgot who this design is made for. Finally grasping such broad topic would not be possible without constant multidisciplinary discussions I had with professionals of many fields. This includes architects, urbanists, artists, municipality and the Government representatives and many more. I understood the power of team work understood as extensive participation and will definitely keep on exploring the endless possibilities of these collaborations in my future career as an architect.