

P5 REFLECTION

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'Design of the Urban Fabric'

This project has above all been an exploration of the inner city of Vlissingen. An exploration in search of the optimal strategy from an urbanism perspective, to revitalize the inner city of Vlissingen considering the problematics and trends the city is facing.

This topic and research is fully in line with the Department of Urbanism, since this department investigates the relationship between urban patterns, society and design, and urban planning interventions that focus on a more sustainable and fair urban environment.

This chosen subject directed my path toward the research group of Design of the Urban Fabric that is part of the Urbanism Department at the TU Delft, as this group focuses on topics such as urban composition, public realm and spatial design intervention. All topics that are in line with the ideas I had in mind for my graduation topic. The research group has multiple focus that are leading themes in this project as well. For example the interaction between the physical environment and the intangible structures. In this thesis this interaction is explored in scenarios, where the intangible structures, the target groups and their behaviour and activities, are leading for design interventions in the physical environment. Another focus of the research group is the transformation of desirable future images (from scenarios) into concrete design interventions. In this research the scenarios are a way to explore what is desirable. They are not desirable in itself. Each scenario formulates recommendations and design interventions for the spatial problematics. The relevant recommendations and design interventions are further explored in the strategy.

Both, my primary and second mentor, encouraged the use of scenarios in my research. The use of the scenarios as an academic design method was aiming to widen the research and to explore what to stimulate and what to avoid in the aim for an optimal outcome. The consultancy of my mentors shaped my way through the methodological framework. During the consultancy, I each time received new input that helped to make the storyline more coherent and clear. I learned to be more critical and come up with my own interpretation of the feedback. The thesis as a whole represents the response to feedback of both my mentors.

This research focuses on the inner city as a whole, since the municipality has no clear vision on this.

But most of all, because the inner city represents a conjunction of diverse problematics which have implications on a spatial, socio-cultural and economic level through different scales, that need to be examined as a whole. Hence, this thesis researches the dynamics of the urban fabric and explores what the desirable future for the inner city of Vlissingen looks like. By doing so, this research is linked to the rather general ambition of both the Department of Urbanism and Design of the Urban Fabric to create and foster high qualitative, vital urban environments.

Research and design

There are different relations between research and design according to Nijhuis (2012): research for design, research through design and research on design. All three relations are used in this thesis. First of all a lot of research for design has been done, such as theoretical research, literature review, data review, analysis and questionnaires. This research has fed the design process with the ultimate objective to improve the quality of the design and increase its credibility. The scenarios are developed to explore possibilities and to generate solutions. The scenario method is research through design. Through scenario thinking the most reasonable concepts were defined to address the various problems.

Also research on existing designs has been done. Specific streets and squares in the inner city of Vlissingen have been examined on design to determine which design interventions to propose.

Together these three ways of research, provide a solid basis for the design proposal. However, in order to make this research on design even more credible, it should not just have been limited to the inner city of Vlissingen, but should have included representative inner cities with a high city experience as well.

The methodical line

The methodology I had in mind for this project since the start, is almost completely executed according to plan. The methodology consists of a theoretical and contextual framework followed by a strategic and design framework based on the knowledge gained from the first two frameworks. In order to define the contextual framework, certain tools were specifically developed. These tools are analysis, data review, site visit and interviews/questionnaires. The theoretical framework is defined by theoretical review and literature review and initially, case studies

were also part of the theoretical framework to define design principles. But, in hindsight, too much time was spent on spatial analysis, leaving no time for case studies. The case studies should have created a stronger basis for the design proposal.

With the knowledge gained from the theoretical and contextual framework the strategic and design framework was formulated directed by scenario thinking and design exercises. As all scenarios turn out to have the same type of recommendations, it can be concluded that the inner city has more 'fixed' problems than 'scenario-dependent' problems. This simplifies the development of the final design. During the process, there was a constant doubt of whether my project would remain consistent and coherent. For me, this was one of the most difficult parts of the thesis, but when reflecting on the used approach, it can be concluded that in the end the thesis is a coherent whole. However, this thesis started with a rather straight-forward focus on the global change in shopping trends and its influence on the city centre, but evolved into a search for a way to make it a place of experience where prosperity grows and an identity emerges. Eventually the relation between prosperity and experience turned out to be less distinct than expected at the start of the project. Although there is an interaction between the two, changes in the theory were needed to keep it right. Furthermore, the spatial mapping process started with the creation of a lot of maps of the urban systems of the city of Vlissingen that were useful to get to understand the city. It provided me with a clear conclusion, but gave me no concrete starting points for my design. I lost my overview in the research hierarchy. Because of that, the design process was delayed and concrete starting points were formulated later on in the process. The

scenario method results were not as expected so the intended story had to be adapted.

So, on the one hand I learned to manage an open process and adapt to unexpected outcomes. On the other hand, the process would have been more efficient if I had been more goal oriented. In a new project I will keep the big picture in mind and try not to get lost in the research results.

Implications of the approach

During my thesis I encountered multiple ethical issues. First of all in doing the research. A method in my research was to conduct interviews to find out how inhabitants and visitors of Vlissingen experience the city centre. Therefore I designed a questionnaire and distributed it via social media. Unexpectedly, over a 1000 people completed the questionnaire. As it was distributed just before the municipal elections, political parties approached me and asked me to share the results of the questionnaire. I did not do so, because in my view this would not have been justified because this was not the purpose and function the questionnaire.

Since the start of my graduation I was in contact with staff of the municipality of Vlissingen. They are interested in using my project to create a vision that is currently being developed. Therefore, the feasibility of the project has been in the back of my mind all the time. Considering the fact, the municipality is practically bankrupt and has no budget to put much in practice, I was considering how far I could take the design interventions. At the one hand I wanted to develop a plan that would be feasible for the city of Vlissingen. On the other hand, the aim of my project is to develop an optimal strategy and design interventions. So I decided to go for that. The optimal strategy is not feasible for the city of

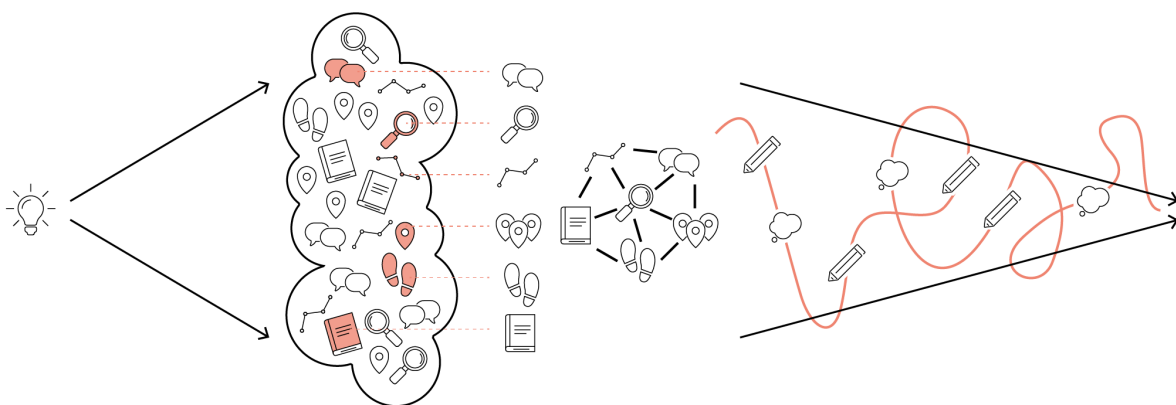


Fig. 1 The proces: From a small idea to an ever growing idea and an 'overload' of information. The filtered and connected information was the start of a design process that became more and more concrete.

Vlissingen today, but it is long term strategy and if it keeps in mind the direction of the strategy and does not deviate, the plan can prove to be very useful and prevent investments that turn out bad later.

Transferability of the project

My project deals with withering inner cities and this is a general problematic in a lot of Dutch mid-sized cities. In this project the city of Vlissingen is explored, to research the problem closely, with the intention to develop a strategic plan and design interventions for the inner city of Vlissingen, but also a strategic planning's and design approach for the revitalization of Dutch mid-sized inner cities. During the research it became clear Vlissingen has a lot of specific local problematics and opportunities. Therefore the approach for the revitalization of the Dutch mid-sized city became less applicable. Despite the fact there is no general approach, the project still is a good example in how to break the downward spiral of a withering city. In a further study it may be interesting to turn this project and other case studies into a general approach for cities with the same problematic.