

# reflection

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Graduation Studio: Designing for Care

## **The approach and relationship between research and design**

Throughout the project, research played an important role. The studio started with small exercises to get to know a new field of research: anthropology. Later, the anthropological research methods learned were applied in a fieldwork week, in which I slept in an elderly home for one week, observing the daily lives of the elderly. The methodology applied during this week is called ethnography, which is about studying a group and its rituals. The usual product of an ethnographic research is a written text. Since the architectural language is a visual one, instead of a written text, the observations were made visual. The observations, but also conversations lead to the first design guidelines. Literature, studying existing theories, questionnaires, a location research and case studies have been used to validate, reinforce and expand these guidelines.

Staying in a place where elderly live, being part of their lives for one week and doing the same things, gave me the opportunity to really dive into their rituals and daily lives. Having this experience and knowledge was so valuable for the design process. It gave me the chance to really ground my design and make well-considered decisions.



The literature research I did after the fieldwork week helped me to organise and structure the observations. Because I did not know what I was going to experience in Huis Assendorp, and during the stay did not know what would be useful and what not, I wrote down, drew and made photographs of almost everything I saw. Once back home, it took a while before I was able to structure everything. The first division of work was in the different scales of the

body, the home and the neighbourhood, which made it hard to see patterns. When telling about what had struck me the most, I (with some help of my tutors) realised that it was something with the independence of the elderly that reoccurred in my stories. So I started reading literature about independence in the lives of people and especially elderly and found that independence in combination with competence and relatedness are essential for intrinsic motivation in life. With these notions in mind I went through all my observations and could draw new and more useful conclusions that I thereafter could use for my design. I for example concluded that appropriation and visibility is what makes common spaces work and creates a feeling of home. That day schedules of people should not be too restricting and that people want to have control over their own lives. That groups should not be too big and facilities should be near (on walking distance for elderly, not young people!) or elderly won't be able to go their by themselves. And that free will leads to more outgoing people and more encounters, that are key in preventing loneliness. Another study, into Jan Gehl's work gave me specific guidelines in how to design public space to stimulate these encounters. The three notions of independence, relatedness and competence became the three main themes in my design. Every choice was now made with them in mind, how it would affect them.

The target group research, done through two questionnaires, was a very useful way of gaining information about how different people want to live. I had done observations and drawn conclusions from patterns that I saw arising during the fieldwork week, but those were just from a select group or people already living in an elderly home and all living in the same one. The target group from the questionnaire consisted out of different people, not only elderly, but also younger ones (the future generation) and all living in and coming from different environments. The results were really useful in determining the program for example, the types of dwellings (the target groups they want to live with) and deciding upon which amenities could be shared or should be private. When I was analysing the results of the questionnaires, one thing that really came forward was the fact that people are really willing to help a little, that they are willing to give a little of their time, skill, knowledge,

etc. It was this insight that led me to the main theme of my design: reciprocity and the act of giving as a base. The locations research inspired me a lot to work with the surrounding. It turned out the neighbourhood did not have a small centre and that it was quite far to the city centre of Hilversum, where the main facilities were. The result was that the people were really separated from public life and vibrancy. On the other hand, the surrounding is very beautiful and even has a historical walking path going right through the plot. This gave me the idea to use this walking path as natural and central element and connect it to more public functions that will enable the residents to live independently and would draw other people from the neighbourhood to the site as well.

type of research	method	outcome for design
ethnographic research	fieldwork observations conversations activities	problems and opportunities facilitation (independence)
literature research	reading articles and books	3 main themes: independence, relatedness and competence guidelines for the design of public space
target group research	questionnaires conversations interviews literature	guidelines for program, dwelling types, amenities (shared or private) overall theme (reciprocity)
location research	observations literature	guidelines for program including the path character of design

After all this research, finding the main themes and guidelines, it was time to start designing. I started writing stories of the people that would live in my design, hoping that could help me get started. This was harder than imagined, because in a story everything is possible and I noticed that I over-thought every detail, which costed a lot of time. To approach it from a different direction I started modelling floor plans with cut paper. This really helped me making quick compositions once the paper rooms were cut in the desired sizes and enabled me to create some basic layout principles and clusters. After being out of options and being a little stuck again, I decided to look at the big scale, something I usually do in the very beginning. I have to say that for the P2 presentation, I had

made a concept design looking mainly from top down and only a little from an idea of how the people would live. That's why after P2 I started with the stories and the floor plans of the single units, until at some point it was time to incorporate the neighbourhood scale again. The whole process has been jumping back and forth from one scale to another, but in the end, the master plan was the first to be definite. I figured the different functions within the design and the composition of these functions and dwellings in relation to the green and public space on the specific location were the most important for my theme of reciprocity. A grid that had emerged during the paper cut floor plan studies helped filling in the master plan in an ordered way. Once I had the master plan (which was more of a "vlekkenplan" or coloured grid in the beginning) sketches helped me visualise how I imagined what the place would be like.



With the "vlekken" / coloured grid squares meant for dwelling I started making new floor plans, now specific to the location on the master plan. Along with some extra research into polyvalent design and the requirements for enabling care always in my mind, slowly the plans evolved until where they are today. The facade and "het maaiveld" were next, since this is where the private domain and the public domain meet. Since in my previous projects I had only focussed on the building part, this was quite a struggle for me. I did not really know where to start and how elaborated it had to be. Neither did I know methods to study this. In the end it came down to looking at a lot of reference projects and again really asking myself, what do the people need and want that are going to live here and what fits within the natural surrounding that

is already there? Another small study into biodiversity helped deciding upon the materials used in the facade, for the construction and in the design of the public spaces. It made it a bit easier to make decisions

If I look back at the process, I can say that research has been leading throughout the whole design process. For every new step, I did some kind of research, either literature, case studies, interviews, observations, research through design, etc. But especially the first semester (the fieldwork week, literature study and target group research) has been leading in the design choices I made. I think that a lot of choices were also made intuitively, with all the knowledge in my mind. I could not always immediately give a reason for why I had done something, but always found that it came from some guideline that I had found during the research. I think this is also a very natural aspect of designing, but it sometimes still feels as just doing something. Afterwards I wish that I had made more study models, but the corona crisis made this a bit more difficult since everything now went online and a 3D model seemed more easy to work with. I also realise that sometimes, because of time pressure, I went on with certain stuff, that I now think of could have gotten a bit more thinking through, but that also encourages me to stay working in this branch of design (designing for care) and expand my knowledge and experience at a firm where they deal with this as well after I graduate.

### **Reflection on the given feedback, translation of the feedback into the work and lessons from my own work**

During the process, the corona virus changed our weekly faculty meetings in weekly Zoom meetings. I noticed that for me, a Zoom meeting works fine, as long as I can tell a convincing story or have a specific question. At a certain moment, the weekly meetings were too much for me, because they forced me to "prepare" a meeting and stopped me in my creative process, resulting in non convincing stories and an insecure Renske. I got the feedback to be more convincing, which I find very hard to be when I myself am not convinced yet from my work (when I'm still in the middle of researching options for example). I am still searching for how to deal with this, since I will have to be convincing towards clients in early stages of the design later in my career as well. As for

the feedback regarding the design, I think I was always very open for tips and always explored what the tutors would say to me. Sometimes I would be disappointed in the beginning, not wanting to make changes again, but I always knew when they did have a point and realised that it would only make my design better. I do think sometimes I was too quick in taking over an advice or changing something, since I have changed things back because I realised that I had not thought it through well enough when changing it and that it did not fit my themes or believes anymore. It was a valuable lesson though, to really think twice before changing something just because someone says it might be better. An example is the changeability of the floor plans. I originally had some floor plans that could be changed so that elderly could stay there and some that were not accessible for elderly. I got the feedback that it would be good to make all the floor plans accessible for elderly since the assignment is about being able to stay in a play and not having to move. So I put a lot of time and effort in making all floor plans flexible, to only realise after way too long (in a conversation with Henri Snell and Birgit afterwards) that I need those young people in my design, so having units that are only accessible for them and not elderly will ensure that there will always be young people living as well, instead of ending up with a neighbourhood that consists of only elderly. What I took from this is to always explore other options and take in advice, but also always go back to your initial position and reasons why you did something before turning the wheel completely.

### **The relationship between my graduation project and the master architecture**

I think the studio Designing for Care is a one of a kind studio in the master track of Architecture. It is one of the few studio's that works in close collaboration with a real care and housing association, Habion, and involves not only architecture but also anthropological studies: a real stay in an elderly home for a week, observing the lives of the target group. Something not much students can say they have done, let alone architects already working in the professional field. Where in previous studio's I missed the feeling of doing something for someone, in this graduation studio I finally got to explore a topic that is very much human centred and focussed on a vulnerable group that relates to and is the prospect of all of us. It opened

up a whole different world and way of thinking, which was so valuable for the rest of the design process and my personal development as an architectural student. It is not about making iconic architecture, but really about translating observations into new solutions. What you see happening, either good or bad is a direct source for the design. This is something quite unique in the architecture track, or at least something we all wish to be doing more.

### **The relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework**

We cannot deny that our society is aging. It is a problem that concerns and affects all of us. How are we going to take care of them? There will also be a point that you yourself will become old. How do you want to live then? How can we try to design the environment in such a way that it can cope with this growing group of care demanding elderly? Can we design in such a way that less professional care is needed? That we live healthier so we get older with a smaller care demand? And what if at some point a cure is found that heals all elderly diseases, like dementia. How can a design that is to expand the amount of elderly dwellings also cope with this and be used in a different way again?

As an architect, this project was an opportunity to think not only about the next generation, but also about my own future. About everyone's future actually. I got to experience what it is like to live in an elderly home and what could be better. The unique combination of this experience and observations, together with a thorough literature study have given me a firm base that is valuable for any architectural firm, researcher or government that is interested in designing for care.

### **Ethical issues and dilemmas during research and design**

The ethical issues that occurred were mainly during the research part of the studio. The first weeks of the studio were about getting familiar with the phenomenon of anthropological research. For this we had to do small exercises, like staying in a crowded place for one hour and observing the people and movements. I was really uncomfortable the first ten minutes, since it felt like I was spying on everyone. For another exercise I visited an elderly

home for a day. This was even more awkward, since I did not know anyone there and the staff and residents did not really understand what I was doing there. I mainly watched and made some notes and sketches, but already making the notes felt as if I was violating their privacy. At some point I wanted to take a picture of a setting, but the woman leading the group caught me and said that I really could not take pictures. I felt really embarrassed, because of course I should have asked it so that was a lesson learnt very early in the research phase.

When the stay in the elderly home had finally come, I felt more confident about observing. Next to this, the elderly home knew we were coming which made it already different. The fact that we were with three girls made the introvert residents less eager to socialise, but after some days they also got used to us and more and more people opened up. Small private talks really help for people to gain trust, so we soon realised that splitting up was a good way of getting to know the people better.

The next ethical issues arose when processing all the gained information. I've had some really personal conversations and not few people started complaining about all sorts of things happening or people in the house as well. It was very valuable information for my research on the one hand, but also felt a bit wrong to be hearing, let alone be it writing down. The residents knew we were documenting everything and sometimes this was what made them say certain stuff, because they really hoped we could change it. The importance in dealing with such information is to take from it what really informs the design, but always respect privacy.

A personal dilemma was leaving the residents after one week, after getting to know them and after winning their trust. It broke my heart leaving some of them behind, knowing that my presence made them so happy.

### **The last month**

After having finished the design for P4, I am planning to look into the best way to present the project during P5. I think that presentation of the work might almost be as important as the result itself, since it is here you can really convince others from your design. It is also the moment

that others who might not know a lot about architecture will see the project and especially because of that it is important to make it a clear and convincing story. The whole research has been done in a quite sensitive way, with a lot of personal stories, so I am planning to let that come back in my final presentation. I hope I can make everyone belief in my design, make them feel as if they would want to live there as well.