

Real Estate at Schiphol Amsterdam Airport

Creating a program to foster the strategic growth of Schiphol
based on the knowledge economy

P5 Report: Master Thesis
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Reflection

This section contains the reflections on the process and conclusions of this graduation thesis, to give an idea on how the thesis progressed from the point of view of the researcher. This section is divided into three sub-parts, namely, research topic, research relevance (scientific and social) and a reflection on the research process, in terms of the content and a personal experience of the researcher.

01 Research topic

This research forms a part of track Management in the Built Environment (MBE), and the graduation lab Real Estate Management (REM). With the aim of the research focused on gaining a deeper understanding into the landside developments at the airport and how the office spaces at the Schiphol can be utilised in an optimal manner to contribute back to the national Mainport strategy, this research forms a part of the MBE track. The literature review, that focused on developing a scientific background for this research, helps to gain an insight into the academic developments on this topic, and the knowledge gap that this research aims to fill.

The goal of the graduation lab Real Estate Management is to understand and close the gap between the demand and supply sides, by providing adequate quality space for the utilisation, both on a long term and a short term basis, and to ultimately contribute to the business needs of the organisation. This aligns with the scope of this graduation thesis, wherein the research then focus on identifying the relevant stakeholders from the demand and the supply sides and analysing their organisational and spatial strategies and demands which influence the spatial developments within the Airport City. Based on the findings from the research, certain strategic recommendations are proposed which help to cater to the current and future demands of the knowledge corporations at the airport, while also contributing towards the overall development of the airport organisation.

02 Research relevance

2.1 Social relevance

This research on the concept of Airport Cities and landside developments, holds importance for a number of parties and can be seen through numerous social perspectives. The problem statement for this research was identified on a societal issue, wherein, the limit on the number of flights and the rising airport charges pose a serious threat to the Schiphol Airport as an international hub. A focus on the landside developments contributes to the overall business of the airport, and at the same time, by addressing the emergent knowledge economy, this research also looks to contribute to the Mainport strategy of the Netherlands by focusing on the knowledge intensive corporations.

Although the concept of an Airport City is quite region-driven where a number of aspects depend on the local factors, this research proposes a theoretical framework and strategic recommendations, that can be adjusted to the local context and be useful for other developing regions and their Airport Cities. Also, as Schiphol is seen as a thriving business location and since the research involved the corporations that are actually located at the Schiphol Airport, while focusing on their demands and strategies, the research is highly pertinent to the other companies located there or are looking to (re)locate at the airport.

2.2 Scientific relevance

Over the past two decades, numerous authors have produced literature regarding the development of Airport Cities and how the spatial developments occur around them. The role of the airport has transformed over the years from being a transportation infrastructure facility to a generator and promoter of economic growth that influences the real estate developments around it. This research aims to build up on and add to the existing literature, in the Dutch context, by combining the two concepts of Schiphol as a Mainport and its economic importance for the region, and the knowledge precincts that are focused on the creation and spill over of knowledge among corporations.

As Conventz and Thierstein (2015a) and Yigitcanlar et al., (2008) call for a deeper research in the fields of urban planning and real estate developments for the airport location, this research tries to fill that gap in the existing literature by adding a third perspective of the locational and real estate requirements for an office at the airport. As explained previously, this research also paves a way that encourages further research in this field which can be transferred to other Airport City locations. Conducting a cross-country analysis will lead to interesting findings, based on a variety of contextual settings and help to develop an international perspective on the topic.

03 Research process

3.1 Content

This section provides a feedback and reflection on the research methods chosen and their results for this graduation thesis. A qualitative research approach was chosen, with the aim of understanding the demands and strategies of the various stakeholders involved at an Airport City. Using the existing literature on the topics of the Mainport and the knowledge precincts helped to develop an ideal knowledge base for the rest of this thesis. Developing a theoretical framework at the end of the literature review was considered a crucial step to give a combined overview of the two topics and helped to structure the next stages of the research.

Next, for the empirical part of the research, the themes and sub-themes identified from the previous stages, set up the foundation and were considered the main guidelines for the rest of the research. Initially, for the empirical part, the researcher had planned to conduct only case studies that would represent the demand side at the Airport City. But, as the research progressed, the researcher realised the importance of adding the perspective of the supply side to get a more holistic view of the subject. Finally, a third perspective was added to the empirical findings which represented the expert opinions, through the triangulation technique, which helped to corroborate the findings from the previous interviews and also have an unbiased opinion towards the topic. Using a semi-structured format for the interviews helped the researcher guide the interviews as per the answers provided by the participants. Having a flexible approach for these interviews also helped to gain a deeper insight into the point of view of the participants. The findings from the empirical part were then added to the previously developed theoretical framework, which helped gain a comprehensive perspective on the topic.

As this research was purely qualitative, having a quantitative approach combined with it could have helped to further strengthen the findings from the study, but nevertheless, having the three perspectives in the empirical part of the research, backed up by the literature review helped to build a solid foundation for this research. It is also important to mention that during this research, an unforeseen global pandemic had occurred, which did create certain obstacles for the research. Most of the interviews and case studies had already been conducted, and the others were conducted through online platforms and telephonic conversations due to the travel bans imposed throughout the world.

3.2 Personal experience

This graduation thesis started in August 2019, with the plan of being completed in June 2020. The starting phase of this research was an intensive period in trying to understand the topic for the thesis. The development of real estate around a transportation hub, especially at an airport was always an interesting idea for me, as Schiphol forms one of the most important airports in the global aviation market. The concept of non-aeronautical activities has been looked into by researchers in the past two decades, and lacks a comprehensive scientific literature, especially from a real estate perspective. Since there is not a lot of literature out there specifically focused on this subject, it was a bit challenging to narrow down the scope of the research and to realise what I wanted to achieve from the thesis.

The open format of the graduation topic is good in the sense that it gives the freedom to choose our own topic of interest, but at the same time, it was challenging for me to try and narrow down the scope. Another challenge I faced was that since the research is done in a context specific to the Netherlands, a large part of the literature had to be translated from Dutch to English, Dutch not being my native language. With two separate topics 'the Mainport strategy' and the 'knowledge precincts' that formed the foundation of this research, a lot of existing literature had to be analysed to establish the relationship and co-dependence between the two concepts.

Next, was the empirical part of the research that I appreciated the most, while conducting interviews with a number of people at their offices at the Schiphol Airport, where I had the chance to verify my findings from literature and add new data to it. This part also required a lot of effort, especially to get in touch with the people for the interviews, sending over 50 requests for the interviews through emails and LinkedIn requests. I was also constantly in touch with some of the personnel from Schiphol Real Estate, who were more than willing to help with the information I needed and also introduced me to some of the other interviewees. The numerous visits to the Schiphol AirportCity gave me an opportunity to actually have a first-hand experience of the setting which was an important step in the research process. The online interviews with the experts were some of the most intriguing conversations, to see the topic from their point of view and understand their take on the research findings.

Finally, I would also like to address that there were certain unexpected developments during the final stages of the research, with the world facing a global pandemic- COVID-19. With this global phenomenon, there is a general concern about the future of the real estate industry, which would also be affected, according certain reports being published that mention the possible changes in the future of the real estate and business locations (Aalders & Raspe, 2020; CBRE, 2020). Although it is difficult to predict the future on such a short term basis, and as mentioned by one of the experts, the real estate market would possibly drop as the companies begin to realise their changing spatial demands, but an airport location has other added advantages that make it more resilient than other business locations, and thus give it a stronger foothold in the market.