

REFLECTION PAPER - DENISE MAASSEN

INTRODUCTION

My graduation project, set within the Architectural Engineering Studio “Valuable Neighbourhoods”, is located in one of the neighbourhoods in Amsterdam’s Western Garden Cities. This part of Amsterdam was built in the 1950s following Van Eesteren’s General Expansion Plan. The design principles of the Western Garden Cities are based on the modernist ideas of light, air and spaciousness in which the functions of living, working and recreating are strictly divided.

Juxtaposing its initial concept of a modern living environment, the reputation of the Western Garden Cities quickly deteriorated over the following decades and the area became known for being plagued by various social issues. The liveability of the neighbourhoods in the Western Garden Cities is much lower than that of the surrounding neighbourhoods, and the municipality of Amsterdam has therefore marked them as “developing neighbourhoods”.

It has been argued that the current low liveability of these neighbourhoods is a direct consequence of their architectural design and spatial layout. However, if these social issues do indeed stem directly from the design of these neighbourhoods, this means that the solution for tackling these issues can be found in transforming those building clusters that comprise the neighbourhoods themselves. Through my research I aim to discover what transformation strategy of the physical environment has the most potential to enhance the social environment and thereby improve the liveability of neighbourhoods in the Western Garden Cities.

RESEARCH

My research focusses on the transition zone between public and private space with the aim of determining the potential of various transformation strategies of these residential building clusters of the Western Garden Cities. The transition zone is the place where most neighbourly contact takes place and with the potential of cultivating social familiarity and sense of safety. From the start of my project, the transition zone of residential buildings has been my fascination, as this demonstrates a clear example of how architecture can influence the social structure of a neighbourhood. The blank walls that comprise the ground-floor façades and the unappropriated streets are typical for building clusters in the Western Garden Cities; they show the transition zone between public and private space to be a distinct weakness of these neighbourhoods.

To investigate how best to approach the transformation of these neighbourhoods in order to enhance their liveability, I aim to answer the following question through my research: What is the potential of varying transformation strategies of residential building clusters in the Western Garden Cities for adapting their transition zone (between public and private space) and improve the perceived liveability of residents in a sustainable way?

I have set out to answer this research question by examining a selection of case studies of projects which that have been transformed in the past 5 years. These projects are all located in the Western Garden Cities and the selection spans both low-rise and high-rise buildings. The strengths and shortcomings of two different transformation approaches used in these projects were analysed; these are renovation, and demolition and rebuilding. These analyses comprise both the physical and the social environment: architectural analyses are made of the transformation of the physical environment and questionnaires were used to map the range of residents’ local social environment and their perceived liveability. The results from these analyses were compared to identify connections between the transformation strategies and improved liveability.

There are some intrinsic shortcomings to using a case study approach: it would be hard to argue that the four case studies used in this research are representative of the Western Garden Cities as

a whole. However, when informed by and placed in the context of existing literature on the transition zone and on the transition zone of building clusters in the Western Garden Cities in particular, my research can thereby focus on transformation strategies can draw some valuable conclusions. I think this is also where the scientific relevance of my research lies: most existing literature focusses on the existing situation whereas my research complements this by investigating the various transformation strategies and looks into improving the current situation.

FROM RESEARCH TO DESIGN

Two main conclusions from my research served, as very useful input into my design project. Firstly, I was able to define a number of design principles for the transition zone between public and private space; principles that would strengthen the social environment and thereby enhance the liveability in the neighbourhood. These design principles aim to soften the transition zone, for example, by introducing a small front garden, having a kitchen in the street-facing rooms, opening up the façade and providing a clear and welcoming entrance.

Secondly, in my research I touched upon the ethics of the different transformation strategies. Where the transformation strategy of demolishing and rebuilding offers more freedom in changing design of the transition zone, this strategy often does not enhance the social environment, but rather erases it and starts anew. When a neighbourhood full of social housing apartments is demolished and replaced with purchasable single-family homes, it is obvious that the liveability will be higher. However, this approach—which is generally known as ‘gentrification’—does not solve the initial problem, but rather moves it elsewhere. Currently, building clusters in the Western Garden Cities are demolished in rapid succession, and so the share of social housing in Amsterdam is decreasing steadily. As an architect I believe it is our duty to tackle these problems rather than evade them, and so in my project I aim to improve the liveability of the existing inhabitants by renovating the buildings and to displace as few people as is necessary.

Additionally, because of the spacious layout of the building clusters in the Western Garden Cities, there is a strong potential for introducing new homes to the neighbourhoods; this would increase the variety of the housing stock and therefore also the variety in regard to the social standing of the residents. Furthermore, it will help tackle the wider issue of housing shortage in Amsterdam, as the city aims to realise 150,000 new homes within its city borders before 2050.

DESIGN

The project I have worked on is situated in the Western Garden City of Geuzenveld and comprises 9 L-shaped buildings that were constructed around 1955. The transition zone of these *portiekflats* is representative of that of numerous other buildings in the Western Garden cities and has many of the typical weaknesses that obstruct neighbourly contact and, in turn, cause a lack social familiarity and a sense of safety. The façade on the ground floor is almost completely closed and borders the pavement next to which cars are parked. The entrances, which comprise small windowless doors, lead to dark and minimally dimensioned hallways which offer no room for any kind of appropriation.

These buildings were extensively renovated in the 1990s and, even though they were insulated on the exterior, no intrinsic changes were made to the transition zone. With my project I set out to improve the transition zone by making some intrinsic changes in the design but with minimal intrusion on the existing social structure. The proposal includes swapping the functions on the ground floor—so that the storage function is located at the rear of the building—and introducing a central entrance with a lift that will connect all homes via a gallery that will also serve as a mini front garden.

Furthermore, the proposal includes newly built homes that will accommodate a greater variety of households. Single bedroom apartments adjacent to the new entrance building could house first time buyers/renters or elderly people; larger multi bedroom apartments on top of the existing buildings could house well-off couples or small families; and, finally, terraced houses enclosing the central courtyard could house larger families.

Feedback from my tutors in the past included the constructive criticism that my plan lacked an identifiable vision. While improving the transition zone to enhance the liveability in this neighbourhood is definitely a necessary intervention, my tutors challenged me to dream further and implement further ambitions to realise this improved liveability. I therefore set out to develop a sort of 'manifest' of interventions that I apply in my project, but that can also be extended to other projects, such as this one in the Western Garden Cities and beyond.

Even though a more spacious, open and softer transition zone will certainly strengthen the social environment of these building clusters I believe that, in order to fulfil its full potential, the transition zone needs some kind activator: a stimulant for residents to use this space where public and private come together. This is where the concept of a *Garden-fresh* City comes in. In order to draw people out of their homes, the transition zone and the public space will be used to cultivate different kinds of food for and by the community. The galleries will facilitate small scale herb gardens that neighbours will share; fruit trees will grow in a central orchard where children will be able to pick fruit, and crops will grow in community-maintained potagers. Communal food production will also stimulate the exchange of recipes and communal eating, and will serve to reconnect people with one another and with the origins of their food.

In the upcoming weeks I intend to further explore how these interventions would have an effect on the day-to-day life of residents, where and when encounters would take place, how different spaces would be used, and what sort of food would be cultivated. Over the next period I intend to explore how people would live in this transformed building cluster and visualise this to make my design come to life. This brings the project back to its initial intent: that of creating a valuable neighbourhood. Due to my personal background, having grown up in a small village where everyone knows one another, I know the value of "*de buurt*". With my project and using the *Garden-fresh* City concept, I intend to strengthen the sense of community and belonging in this neighbourhood, as well as in other neighbourhoods in the Western Garden Cities that are yet to be transformed.

