

In this section I want to discuss and reflect on my graduation project thus far. First, I would like to focus on research and design and elaborate on my approach and choice of research method. If it 'worked or not' and what can be learned from it also in relation to the process of designing. But I also want to elaborate and reflect on the (scientific and societal) relevance of the project. Afterwards I would like to reflect more on my personal process during this graduation project and what I have learned from it.

Research & Design

After carefully having read a lot of literature on the intersection of the spatial and the social, I chose to start the research part in an open and exploratory way. I was above all interested in what could result from this, a more inductive approach, and not really trying to validate specific theories or findings. This, I believe, also accurately portrays the objective of the studio "Explore Lab": exploring and wandering, following a certain fascination. This was also something I was sometimes missing in my past studios. These studios, in my opinion, were perhaps overly focused on a 'problem and solution-finding' approach to architecture. Which could feel quite imposing and normative, especially in contexts that are not familiar to you in any way. In this project I thus wanted to work on a local context (Rotterdam, close to the Nieuwe Binnenweg, is also the city where I live) and immerse myself in this context to try to (sort of) understand it first. I think it is interesting to see what could be learned from this process without problematizing certain aspects of it for a design brief.

In summary, I am pleased with the research technique chosen which I found to be both useful and educational. Instead of just observing or talking to individuals in a more fixed setting, I think truly talking to people and experiencing a certain context while walking in it opened a lot of stories and finally led to a rich quantity of data in the form of transcripts and the supporting maps. In these conversations I also opted for an open and 'loose' approach. Some themes were prepared, but a lot of room was left for emergent topics to discuss (material) aspects of the built environment that prompted stories and anecdotes. In the case of my project for instance, perhaps unexpectedly, we also very often talked about how people relate to the street from behind the façades, instead of just experiencing the street as one walks through it. Besides, this open approach was also suitable to explore the more human and social side to the built environment. I didn't want to intimidate the people I was talking to by being too strict, serious, or 'scientific' in my approach and interactions. In retrospect some conversations sometimes maybe started a bit too open, which could have caused some confusion for the respondents. In a follow-up study it could perhaps be interesting to specifically reflect more on the specific (material) elements as described earlier in my research paper.

Finding a balance in being specific on the one hand but leaving room for unexpected findings is challenging. Especially when talking to people. (One-time) Conversations with people you don't know require a lot of care and sensitivity, which is also the point in which the intersection with sociology becomes relevant in my opinion. This sensitivity and care in communicating with people, as well as the 'ethical concerns' that accompany it, are potentially features and skills that we as architects may acquire from the social sciences. Opening up the architectural profession both towards everyday users of space (by talking to them), as well as other disciplines. Taking a more interdisciplinary approach, both in terms of methodologies and in terms of research.

In reflecting on this process and my previously criticized 'problematizing approach' to architecture, I believe what's crucial to remember is that talking to people is not (always) about asking "what people want" or "what problems you can address". It's about developing a certain sensitivity and empathy to the context. That is why, as a spatial researcher, I believe it is equally critical to become familiar with the setting and to conduct extensive 'fieldwork' to examine "*subjects in ways which require both physical and cognitive proximity, to experience what you are studying.*" (Sassatelli in Urbiquity, 2019). Realizing that in sociology, it was also important (and something I really appreciated) to develop this sensitivity. Or as my thesis professor in sociology described, developing *sociological imagination*, the ability to relate broader (social) developments to the individual world of experience and perception. This, I suppose, can also nourish a spatial researcher and designer. It feeds a way of thinking about how space can and will be used, about how certain elements make up a space, rather than shaping space in its entirety, about the life between those elements. Which also opens up questions about the role of the architect. Where does the architect stop? And where does life take over? What is fixed? And where do we let go of control? What other movements and dynamics does a design intervention instigate?

Thereafter, once you think you've developed that (particular) sensitivity and empathy it's interesting to take distance and consider the bigger picture. In the case of this project, how would my findings relate to other streets in Rotterdam, or other (Dutch) cities. And how would this manifest itself in a small community rather than a city? Like accurately described by one of the participants, the Nieuwe Binnenweg is a super diverse street: "*I like the fact that so many different people walk around here. What I really like about the street is that it gives me the feeling that there is no dominant group, it's a real mix.*". This project is a reading and discovery of space in a super diverse street. But what and how can we learn from this if we want to draw bigger lessons about the city and our vision on urban life also in other parts of the city?

These kinds of lessons can be instructive considering (urban) policies and a more comprehensive approach. The policy side was also an important starting point for this project and a side that perhaps became more and more neglected within the project. Reflecting on this again I would say that the question about “liveability”, approached from a different angle, is still central in my project. It shows what another reading of that concept of “liveability” might look like, in a way also answering questions about what we find important and what we value in the public realm and society in general. Admitting I think it is still difficult, also when talking to people about the project, to define how both “disciplines” relate. I think designers of policies and designers of space are in a way actually fairly similar. Concluding that policymakers, similarly to architects, would benefit from developing this previously mentioned sensitivity, empathy and eye for the everyday, the ordinary.

Personal Process

In the beginning, the planning of the research required a shift in mindset after doing the thesis in sociology, which was more rigid, structured, and theoretical. This approach felt too limiting in this project. After a while I started embracing a ‘looser’ and more ‘relaxed’ approach to doing research, something that was stimulated very much by both my research and architecture mentor. This and the fact that they trusted the process was very helpful for me. The more ‘relaxed’ approach also helped in my research method, in the conversations and walks I had in the street. This part of the project, going around the street, talking to people, and keeping an open, interested, and exploratory view within these conversations felt very natural to me and was something I really enjoyed. The challenge of balancing between asking questions and finding valuable information and connecting, making people feel comfortable to share stories and being careful was something I really enjoyed. And I think this joy was almost always mutual. People were open and willing to talk. Which made it in this part of the project easy for me to also trust on this approach and process.

After P2 the graduation schedule asks for more focus on design and again a shift in mindset. A step and part of the process that was more difficult for me to trust upon and to find joy in. It was the part in which normally some aspects are problematized to find a ‘solution’. Especially in thinking of a function or program for your project. In this shift I was again grateful for the help of my mentors, who stimulated me to take a more ‘radical’ approach and take more distance from the street and the people, my subjects of study. It helped me realize that maintaining this distance is crucial, especially in academic work.

In the end, the project turned out to be less ‘radical’ and actually quite context specific. However, I believe that this mental exercise of ‘going radical’ was important to get to this place, and important for me to realize that I prefer working in existing contexts. The main lesson learnt from this design project and my mentors, is to trust more on the process. Just like research, designing is not a puzzle that just has to be put together. There is not just one solution or outcome. It’s a jumble of disparate, hazy notions that becomes honed and polished with time (and never fully polished and finished). In this process it is critical to not be frightened to let go of certain beliefs or ideas, or to allow your own ‘opinion’ or ‘feelings’ to play a role in the process. I learnt to approach this process in a more relaxed, less controlling manner, as I believe an architect should: letting go of the image of the perfectly planned, controlled building.

I see this project as the commencement of a process and (personal) struggle. It is not attempting to give solid answers but hopes to open and unlock a different representation of (public) space for policymakers and designers in trying to show the value of socio-spatial elements that cannot be easily quantified. The value of the built environment and the city is found in the moments when people talk about something with love, excitement, and pleasure. I think everyone has their own way of seeing these pleasures. That is something that we, as spatial researchers and designers, must recognize and cherish. It is up to us to take in this information, listen to it, and discover it, among other things, by just walking with people and listening to them. It changed my understanding of the way I appreciate urban life and how you may experience it. In some ways, it also showed me what I enjoy about architecture and the built environment. Knowing that I don’t want to be an architect (at least not right after graduation), I wanted to use this project to learn about how a more interdisciplinary approach can exist and what I would find fun and intriguing about it. I am grateful to my mentors for allowing me the flexibility and space to pursue this.