

Building a Social Community

Reflection

REFLECTION | BUILDING A SOCIAL COMMUNITY

Delft University of Technology
MSc Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences
MSc3 Dwelling Graduation Studio 2019 / 2020
AR3AD133 Designing for Care in an Inclusive Environment

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1 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND DESIGN

The research report "Building a Social Community" is about how spontaneous interactions can prevent loneliness among elderly. The research is based on a fieldwork, literature review and questionnaire. While some of the conclusions made in the research are strongly apparent in the design, others are more nuanced. The main conclusion of the research is that people should be tempted to leave their private domain in order to spontaneously meet people in the public realm. An important part is having control over the amount of interaction one would like to have. Privacy zones can help distinguish the privacy and thus amount of interaction one has. In public spaces people have less privacy then compared to private spaces. This also means that people have less control over a public space and the actions that take place there. This privacy zoning is well represented in the urban scheme by the transitions one must make to eventually enter their dwelling. This also stimulates the visibility as people pass along the dwellings of the elderly.

To increase the visibility of the elderly even more functions have to be placed within the plan to attract people from the rest of the neighbourhood. To know which functions the elderly like to have in their surroundings, I conducted a questionnaire. The people who filled in this questionnaire are general people of all ages and not people specifically of the surroundings of the site. This is deliberately done as the project can be seen as a test of implementing the results of the research in to a design. This means that the location only depicts the placement and connection to the urban fabric as well as the functions present in the neighbourhood. But this means that this project may not be the ideal solution for this location. What has been taken into account are which functions are already present as multiple functions of the same type in the neighbourhood would make one of them redundant.

A theme where the input of the research report is less apparent is in the layout of the dwelling itself. Here I did focus on the effects visibility and independence of the resident have on the layout but further design choices are made without the input of the research. This does not mean that the design ignores the results of the research but there are simply no conclusions that strongly have an effect on the private domain.

In block G the relation between research and design is almost not present next to the fact that the functions within are based on the results of the questionnaire. This building has also no direct connection to elderly housing and is therefore also not been thought out as far as the other buildings as my focus went more to those.

2 METHODS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The research is partly based on fieldwork which consisted of ethnographic research in elderly housing. This fieldwork was a complete week living among elderly and finding out what problems or opportunities there are within the field of elderly housing.

During this stay which I conducted together with another student who follows the same studio, we were focussed on movement of elderly, their daily tasks and their living arrangement compared to their physical state. But during this visit I had no particular focus yet for my research as we were advised to be open minded and focus on the problems we encountered during our visit. As we progressed in our fieldwork we learned that the situation there for many people was suited and good. We only spoke to happy residents. This made us wonder if there were actually people who did not enjoy their situation within the complex. We therefore asked our contact person on the location if there were any people who did not enjoy their living situation there as this might shed light on problems to focus on during our research. We then proceeded to speak to multiple people whom where lonely or unhappy. This gave other insights as loneliness was strongly felt by two residents we spoke. This impacted me, which made me choose for this topic as my research topic.

In hindsight I had not much material about loneliness as we only spoke to the people who felt lonely at the end of the stay. These people did not leave their house that often for the activities we joined during our stay. I focussed completely on the things happening during this stay and not on the things that were not happening or things that I regarded normal. What would have helped my research was to have focussed on such events for the complete week. But to fully understand what activities or behaviour are not taking place means to know what is normal in this complex and in other housing for elderly. This means I should have visited multiple elderly complexes for more than one week to be able to notice such differences. As the graduation studio is only 40 weeks the time to conduct such a research is not sufficient. The events witnessed during the week are therefore not validated and are only an introduction into certain topics to investigate. The body of the research is therefore mainly literature based. To compensate for the loss of input during the fieldwork I still conducted a questionnaire about preference of functions of multiple demographic groups as mentioned earlier. While the information gathered during the fieldwork was not relevant for my research report, it still can be considered a unique learning experience of which I can use the knowledge gathered throughout my whole upcoming career.

But being dependent of mostly literature makes it hard to validate the research. In architecture certain literature is highly regarded while the things stated in it are not always proven. The use of such literature can therefore lead to discussions. My research is also based partly on such literature.

Some of the statements made in the books used are undebatable while others are open to discussion. An example of this is J. Gehl's statement that height differences are not beneficial to social interactions. While this seems logic it has not been proven scientifically.

The conclusions made in the research can therefore be debatable but as architecture is not an exact science this does not have to be a bad thing. Architecture is debatable and therefore good discussion on topics are take place and should keep taking place. Defining what architecture is and the personal preferences it is linked to are what makes it interesting and complex.

3 SOCIAL, PROFESSIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORK

As elderly become an increasingly large part of the population it is good that we rethink the way we design housing for them. With the current political changes about the housing situation and the stimulation of elderly living longer in their own home, it is a relevant issue on its own.

While elderly are a vulnerable group that needs a stimulating environment around them as they no longer are capable of going to other places, they live in large isolated complexes. Every function is present there and there is no need for the elderly to go outside. The space around the complexes are mainly dominated by car parking and are also not stimulating.

By rethinking the way elderly live, architecture can offer a better life for the remaining years these people have. Instead of making a building which is only accessible for elderly with functions only for elderly, housing for this target group should be more focussed on place making around cores where care is also present.

I think my project is a step towards such an approach where elderly live among other demographic groups with public functions around them and with care if they need it. This place making for elderly can be implemented throughout villages and cities. Such a situation also gives elderly more independency and can lead towards more elderly labour which in the long run is also better for the economy.

While this project is transferable on its own it would be good to take the concept of place making for elderly and experiment with the conclusions made in my research report. There will likely be a better way to design such an environment and to provide suited housing for this target group.

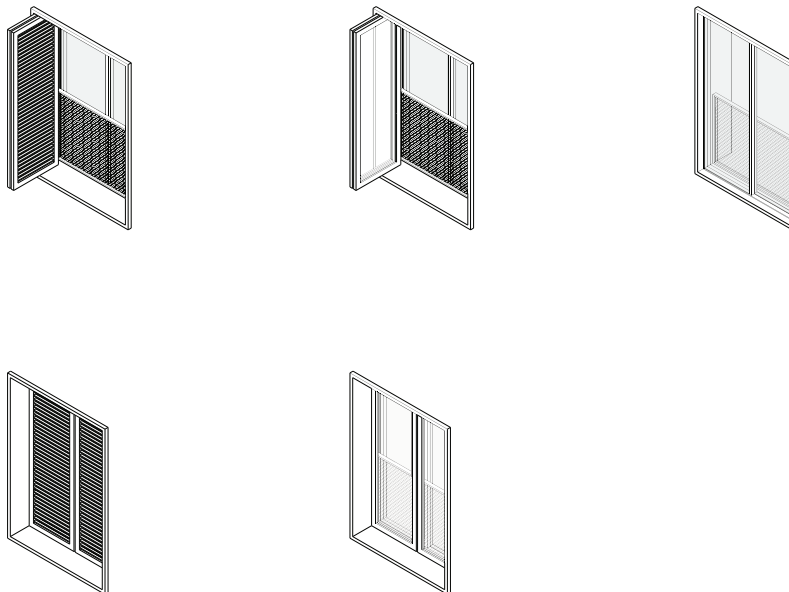
4 ETHICAL ISSUES AND DILEMMAS

Loneliness is a form of pain. In order to prevent it people have to become socially active. Spontaneous social interactions provide new relations with people within a community. Being part of a community and being known to the people within such a community can promote the establishment of weak ties between the different residents. But it is also important to consider someone's privacy as privacy is having control over ones personal situation. Privacy can help prevent loneliness as it enables people to retract from social situations if they do not want to socialize. But this is actually a contradiction as privacy (control over exposure) and visibility (exposure) can be seen as opposites. When increasing the exposure of the elderly to the rest of the community their feeling of privacy is reduced and social interaction becomes something uncomfortable.

On the other hand giving people full control over their privacy especially when they are socially vulnerable can lead to them retracting from public life. So there is also the moral obligation for designers to think about these issues and increasing exposure.

So how can architecture define the right balance of exposure and non-exposure? And is there actually a balance? During this process I could not answer these questions and I will never will as privacy is a personal issue. Everybody has different standards and values which makes it impossible to make a design suited for everybody without giving the inhabitants control over their privacy. This dilemma does shed light on the fact that architecture is not an exact science and that some outcomes will always remain a topic of discussion.

During this design process I interpreted this balance as giving people the opportunity to control their own environment but making it clearly visible to the outside world how they would take control. By adding shutters the effect of people retreating is that they have to close them. If they are always closed this is a signal to other dwellers that they retreat form public life. In this way it is sort of a signal to the community that they have social problems and maybe need support. Of course curtains also provide this type of control but they are positioned in the private realm while the shutters are the border between private and public.



Next to these the implementation of these shutters I placed a vertical frame to order the façade but also to block the visibility into the dwellings. This can be seen as good as it establishes privacy and only if one really wants to look inside they have to turn their head when walking past a window. While it also reduces the visibility of the elderly which is something I want to establish. This dilemma is thus present in several design choices I made.

This balance is still an individual interpretation and can thus be doubted. This design solution is even a dilemma of myself as the next day I might have a different view on it. But I think this can be considered a good thing and not a loose end. As if I would have no doubts, I would be ignorant or I would have made the ideal plan that does not need to be reconfigured anymore. But if that was the case I would have "finished" architecture as a profession.

