

REFLECTION PAPER | HEALING SHELTER

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In this paper I will reflect upon my graduation project 'Healing Shelter'. The paper is structured in three main parts. The first part will be concerning the relationship between research and design, the second about the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social and scientific framework. The last part will be concerning the potential applications of the results in practice.

Relationship between research and design

My graduation topic is concerned with the design of a homeless shelter in Rotterdam. I chose this topic out of a personal fascination. Ever since I moved to Rotterdam, I have seen a lot of homeless people in the streets and I wondered how this was possible. Why didn't the homeless people choose to sleep in shelters? Could a 'better' design be part of the solution?

I chose to graduate in the Rotterdam-based research institute Veldacademie. I made this decision because the Veldacademie has a lot of expertise in dealing with social and spatial issues in Rotterdam. Unfortunately, I couldn't conduct my own research and was persuaded to work on another research topic. Even though this has cost a lot of time I eventually learned the 'Veldacademie' approach of tackling a social and spatial issue on neighborhood-scale.

I eventually decided to switch to Studio Health; a healthcare-oriented studio. The focus of Studio Health is a user-based design approach and the use of evidence-based design methods. I thought this design approach of studio Health would make my project more grounded. Many homeless people suffer from complex psychosocial problems and addictions; therefore, I have interpreted homeless shelters as healthcare facilities.

The goal of my research was to formulate a series of recommendations for better shelters, based on the conclusions of my research. At the beginning of my research I didn't have a location for an architectural intervention, so I also used my research as an investigatory journey. Which homeless shelter would benefit most from an architectural intervention?

I started my research with quantitative research, which was concerned with collecting and analyzing existing data and literature about homeless people in the Netherlands. This information gave me a better understanding of the scope of the problem. I also conducted a broad historical analysis of how we have dealt with the poor and homeless in the past. Care for the homeless and poor, has always been subjected to seemingly contradicting principles; trying to find a balance between caritas, punishment and rehabilitation.

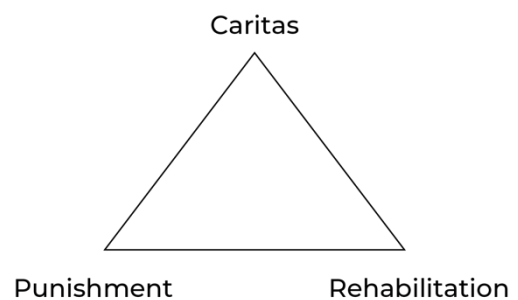


Figure 1 - Contradicting priorities in dealing with the homeless



Figure 2 - Stress factors in homeless shelters

The second part of my research was concerned with qualitative research methods. I wanted to immerse myself into the world of the homeless, and experience how passing time in different homeless shelters would affect my mood. I visited several day-shelters and spoke to homeless people and staff. I was surprised by the hospitality and care of the personnel. Unfortunately, I wasn't allowed to visit the night-shelter in the William Booth-house (WB-house), as the head of staff was wary of possible negative publicity. Luckily, I found some movies, drawings and pictures of the interior of the building. I also interviewed a former resident of the night-shelter. This gave me sufficient insight of how the building was used

and how living in this shelter affected the residents. I was quite shocked by the desperate conditions of this homeless shelter. I also learned that a long stay at the shelter only increased the problems of most homeless people. So, it is no surprise that so many homeless people prefer to sleep outside.

The third part of my research was concerned with searching for adequate spatial solutions for the shelter of the future. I looked into literature about Evidence Based Design (EBD) and Healing Environments. Evidence Based Design is a design method that uses scientific evidence regarding patient wellbeing in relationship to spatial interventions. Design interventions in healthcare facilities such as single-bed rooms, access to nature and daylight, and a clear floor layout have proven to reduce stress level of patients and staff.

I also looked for spatial examples of existing homeless shelters and other healthcare related facilities. This was more a subjective approach, as I selected certain spatial solutions of these projects I found to be inspiring for my own project. I made a series of diagrams of what spatial solutions should be pursued and what spatial configurations should be avoided.



Figure 3 - William Booth-House

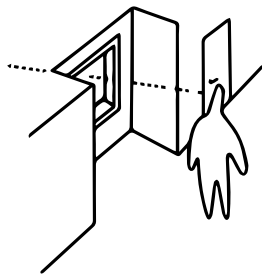


Figure 4 - Corridor with daylight

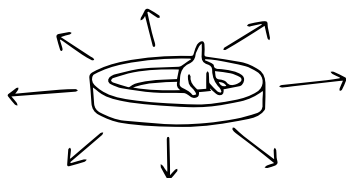


Figure 5 - Panopticon layout

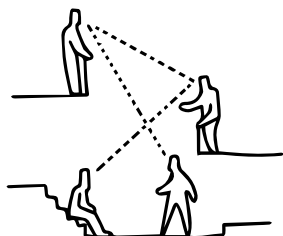


Figure 6 - Social control through central atrium

As main conclusion of my research I identified the stress factors in the organizational and spatial aspects of the chosen shelter in Rotterdam. I used those conclusions for a series of recommendations for a new type of homeless shelter that would be focused on providing of a stress-reducing environment for the residents, as well as empowering the residents by involving them in the running of the shelter. This new shelter would not be a closed facility anymore but would also have a publicly accessible part. In this way it would be possible for the homeless to invite family and friends, and local residents would be invited to drop by for a coffee or thee. This was important, as the neighborhood lacked any community center or other relevant meeting places. So, I decided that the public part in the new shelter should be attractive enough for people from the neighborhood and could even serve as an unofficial community center.

After the research was done I started to think about the next phase of my graduation, the design of a building. I chose to transform the shelter in the WB-house using the recommendations of my research. This was important for me, as I wanted to show how the current situation is, and how a shelter could look like if the recommendations of my research were implemented.

For the design of the shelter I first took a closer look at the site conditions of the WB-House. The site conditions were quite restrictive. The main restriction was that the surrounding neighbors should not be negatively impacted by the added structure. So, the new structure should not block any existing sunlight or infringe the privacy the neighbors by new overlooks. I used the limitations and strengths of the location to create an informed building envelop. However, after discussing the preliminary design with my mentors, I decided to take a step back, and see if parts of the current building could be reused in the new design. This resulted in a more viable design.

The main challenge of the interior of the building was the design of the public, semi-public and private spaces. The idea of making a part of the building public accessible, didn't mean that the public should have unrestricted access to the whole building. Vulnerable residents might prefer to have the possibility to pull back into their own, secluded space. In the design of those spaces, I chose to use scale models.

This was helpful, as it gave me a more transparent feeling of the geometry. The result was a spiral like floorplan, with in the core the most private spaces. I placed the counter and staff room in strategic positions, for optimal overview of the open spaces.

For the final part of the design process I will focus more on the details of building. Parts of the interior that deserve extra attention are the informal meeting places. These could be achieved with architectural elements, like creating wide window frames that could also serve as seating. I will also focus on the climate of the building. The façade should not only have grate isolation to prevent heat loss but should also prevent overheating in the summer by shielding the adjacent spaces against direct sunlight.

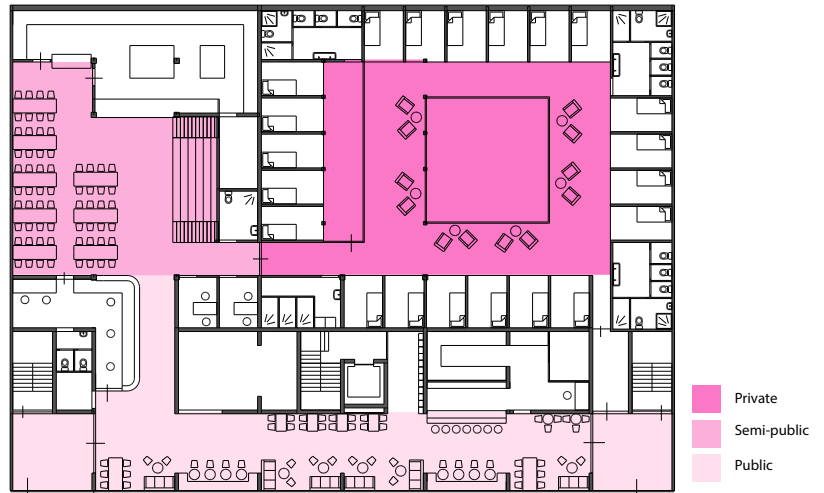


Figure 7 - Transformation WB-House, residential spaces ground floor

The relationship between the graduation project and the wider social framework

The topic of my graduation project, of how to shelter homeless people, is a very relevant one. Since 2009 till 2016 the Dutch homeless population has risen with more than 70%. Recent study 'Niet thuis geven' by the Rotterdam Court of Audit (rekenkamer Rotterdam, 2018) criticized the way Rotterdam deals with the homeless. According to the Court of Audit, the current policy in Rotterdam is based upon managing homelessness instead of eliminating homelessness altogether by providing enough affordable housing. In the current system, homeless people are forced to sleep in shelters for months or even years before they can move on to a suitable accommodation. This is problematic, as shelters only provide in basic needs. Homeless people don't have their own place in the shelters and are forced to share their bedroom with complete strangers. The food is not freshly cooked but prepared somewhere else only to be reheated in the shelter. In the morning the residents need to wake up early and hit the road. Many people lack any meaningful activity and have little other choice than to sit in a day shelter and wait till the day is over.

The design of the shelter also reflects this attitude of providing little more than the basic necessities. The floors and walls are covered in tiles, the bedrooms have bunkbeds and the residential space only has harsh wooden chairs and tables. Providing comfort and serving the psychological needs of the homeless is clearly not part of the equation.



Figure 8 - William Booth-House dormitory

With my graduation project I would like to bring attention the problem of homelessness in the Netherlands. I also would like to debunk some common misconceptions about this issue. When I talk with friends about my graduation topic I am quite shocked about the false perception many people have about the homeless. They seem to believe that homelessness is just a choice. They don't know how easy it is these days to become homeless, nor do they know about the many hurdles that are placed by the current system that

make it extremely hard for people to beat homelessness.

I see my project also as a starting point of the discussion of how we as a society should deal with homeless people. If we compare homeless shelters to psychiatric units or even prisons we see that the homeless get the short end of the stick. More money is allocated to the accommodation and treatment of criminals than to the accommodation of the poor. On the other hand, the accommodation of homeless people is unnecessary expensive, estimated at between 65 and 90 euro per bed per night! These high expenses are difficult to defend,

if we look at the primitive conditions in homeless shelters. One of the reasons of these high costs, is the division between a night and day shelter. This means that homeless organizations need to pay for the rent and maintenance of two buildings. Another reason is for these high costs is that in current system, homeless people are treated as passive observers. Tasks like cleaning and cooking is outsourced to private organizations, which is expensive. These tasks could also be carried out by the residents of the shelters for a fraction of the costs. The money saved could be used to create private sleeping units and a comfortable and attractive common spaces. In this way, residents would have less stress during their stay and would have the possibility to become more self-reliant.

Potential applications of the results in practice

Unfortunately, the Dutch salvation army didn't want to cooperate with my project. However, it's the municipality that is in charge of the policy and the allocation of funds for the homeless. So, I am planning to contact Sven de Langen, municipal councilor of Rotterdam. In an interview with RTV Rijnmond (2018), he stated that Rotterdam has plans to create better shelters, with more privacy. I would like to show him my solution and challenge him to rethink the current failing homeless policy.

My solution of combining a neighborhood lounge with homeless shelter is something that could also work in other countries. Currently New York is investing millions of dollars in creating new homeless shelters. However, the recently delivered shelter on the Landing Road (Edelman Sultan Knox Wood Architects, 2018) still repeats the existing formula also used decades ago in the design of the WB-House. Just as the William Booth-house, it's a secluded night shelter, with a very sterile, institutionalized interior. The only improvement if we compare this shelter to the WB-House is the added privacy screens in the collective sleeping rooms. I would like to prevent Rotterdam from making the same mistake by investing public money into new shelters with small improvements. Whilst investing the money in into a new type of shelter that not only uses spatial interventions backed by Evidence Based Design, but also a shelter that enables the residents to participate in the running of the shelter is still on the table This is a win-win solution, as it would enhance homeless people's sense of self-worth and independence and would provide them with a useful way of spending their days.

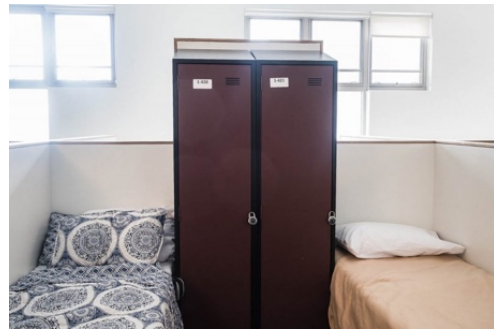


Figure 9 - Landing Road Residence, dormitory with privacy panels

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