

A Gentle Neighbourhood, Designed to Last

Reflection

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Overall graduation process

Preparation

If you can't do everything, focus on:

A. What is more difficult

B. What cannot be done individually

C. What will guarantee the common good in the future.

- ELEMENTAL

Prior to this graduation the process and collaboration with Management in the Built Environment (MBE) student Lena van der Wal already started. Both of our fascination was 'social entrepreneurship', a form of entrepreneurship in which the financial aspect supports a societal (social and environmental) goal that is the core business of the entrepreneurship. A phenomenon yet to be seen and known in the built environment. This fascination has led to several products prior to our start of this graduation. One is the BOSS Study Trip we have organised together, with the theme 'Changemaking through Social Entrepreneurship' in which we also have set up and created the MSc. elective course: 'Experience Social Entrepreneurship' for students to learn tools how to start a business with a societal goal. Another product was my theoretical thesis which in retrospect has played a large role in our vision of our graduation: 'Design for Social Equality: To Achieve Social Sustainability in Uneven Developed Suburban Areas'.

With this knowledge, gained through practice and academic research, Lena and I further developed our fascination for social entrepreneurship, specifically focussed on the built environment. And it is here where we stumbled upon the history and biography of the first Dutch social entrepreneur Jacques van Marken, who was responsible for the development of Agnetapark, Delft. A neighbourhood known to be loved by many people. Van Marken was able to create a long-term great functioning neighbourhood, in a gentle and social way putting the needs of the inhabitants first while also creating and testing innovative ideas in order to better the neighbourhood through time. What did he

do to obtain this result? How is it that this project specifically is such a success? What can we learn from this? With these fascinations Lena and I were collectively admitted in the Explore Lab track to find out how to embed social entrepreneurial thinking in designing and developing urban areas.

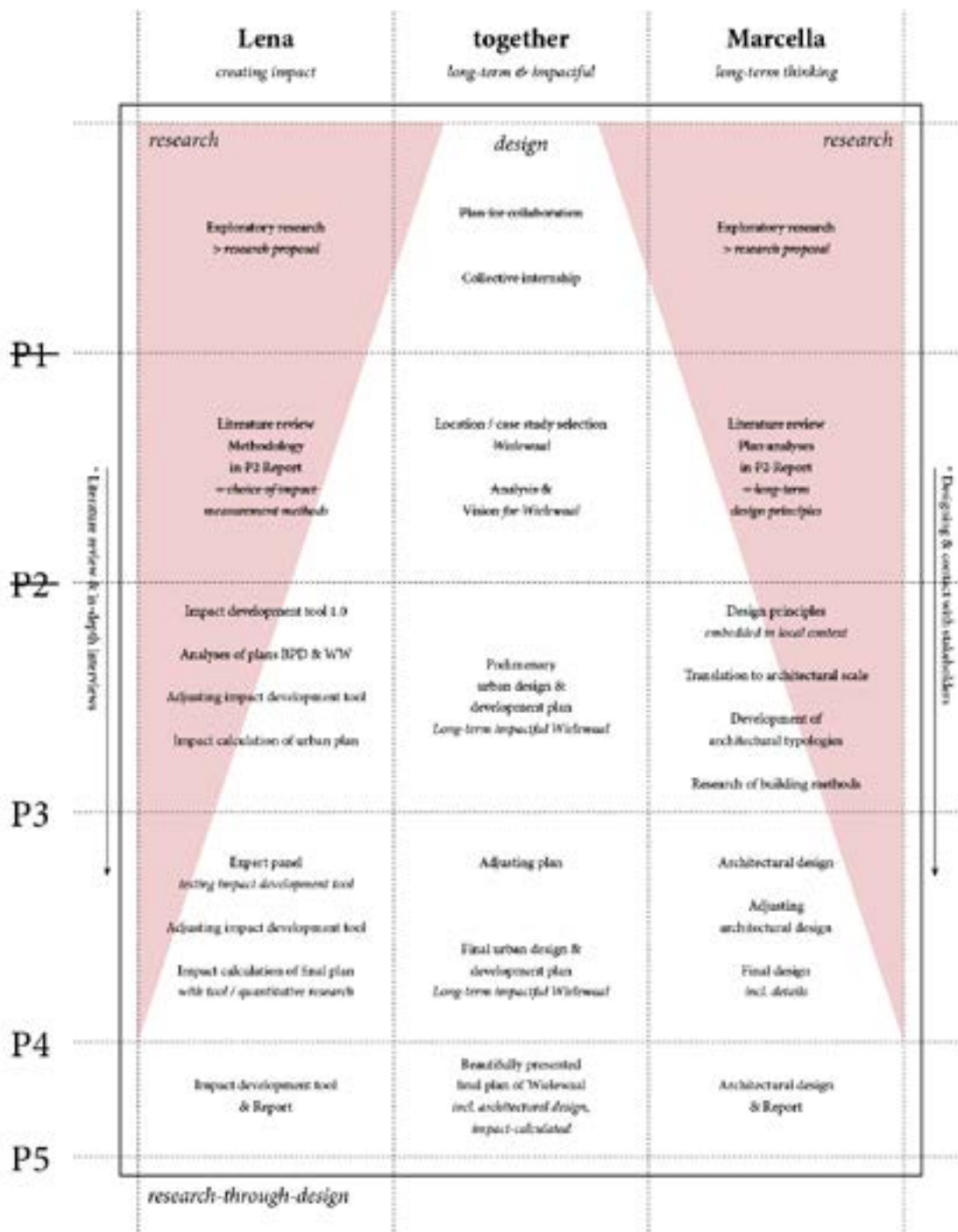


Figure: Initial planning of our collaboration

Before P2

After the exploration phase, two topics stood out as the most important aspects: urban development and social entrepreneurship. In which Lena focussed on the social entrepreneurial side and the future; and I focussed on the urban development and its history. As we interchange our findings from our own fields, new insights and solutions would be created as a result of acting cross disciplinary.

It was also a period in which the graduation took a form. My exploration on the topic of long-term urban development, was extensive. A topic itself that was in fact very large and complex for a Master graduation research. (Luckily, I did have a head start with the activities done before the graduation in Explore Lab.) Focused on the exploration of this topic of urban development I have gained a lot of knowledge, which I wanted to share all of it through my thesis. But in the end, throughout the feedback processes, I was unsure about the structure of the thesis and therefore not sure about what to share anymore; doubting my own abilities. In the beginning, when things still went intuitively, I was confident about the fact that we all could learn from the past. As I, still, believe that projects will have to stand a test through time. A success therefore can only be confirmed after a long-term use. But at the same time, as we, in the field of architecture, try to 'innovate' constantly for the sake of change, I felt like a lot of valuable knowledge is being overlooked.

All in all eventually a framework was created as a conclusion to the research which at first felt very generic, but later on in the process became more valuable. It has become a tool to quickly analyse projects on different values. Looking back, I'm very glad about the findings of the ten principles as conclusion to my research. Although this period was more focussed on the individual research I did lack two aspects of my graduation. One is the lack of collaboration with Lena and therefore our integration was absent. Both Lena and I were a bit too deep in the research and in a way we had lost our reason of why we were doing our graduation. This resulted in to the lacking of the second aspect and that was the design, the spatial translation of our knowledge.

Before P3

After passing our P2, we felt the urge to see things in a bigger picture again of why we do things and felt the urge to work together. Yet in practice this was very difficult as our schedules due to our researches did not match in any way. This may have been due to the fact that there was seemingly no connection between the researches of Lena and me anymore. Not only in practice, but also in the academic world, for a moment It felt like MBE and Architecture seemed to be treated separately. Nonetheless, our individual findings, although found in different fields, complement each other very well.

One of the reasons for me to join Explore Lab was to be able to explore my topic in a different way. In the period from P1 till P3 I regularly visited the design location, spoke with the inhabitants and had a lot of interviews with different stakeholders surrounding this area of Wielewaal. Although I ended up with a theoretical research and thesis, it was in fact a very good addition to my knowledge as I have learned

a lot from the practice. Have I been a bit more confident in myself and my intuition, I may have had a very different research method and form in which my findings were presented. One that might have been more representative of me. This uncertainty within the whole process can also be seen in my grade, one the lowest I have achieved in my Masters track: 7,5. Although the mixed feelings I have about this thesis, my research seems to be highly appreciated by one of the larger research institutions related to practice. So in a way I did achieve something that has given a boost back into my confidence. Maybe after a while that I will see more value in the things that I have done without being too harsh.

The excessive time I have spent in my research and the absence of collaboration with Lena partly have affected my design process. Time wise the research went on for far too long, and the lack of collaboration also hindered the choice of housing types and other design decisions. Although of course I could still design and go on with my individual part, there was a boundary in which I was able to do that as this graduation is also collaborative. During this hectic period two more aspects were added against our graduation process. One is the absence of my previous Building Technology teacher and the switch to a different tutor. Another was the fact that there was a pandemic outbreak that has affected the overall way of working and had negative outcomes and unfortunate losses in my own personal environment. Both aspects that were out of my control, and both that took a bit of time to adapt to.

Before P4

After the P3, yet again Lena and I still want to integrate our knowledge into this design as we firmly believe in our collaboration. This time we seem to succeed a bit more into working together and finally have found different ways in order to do so. Presumably this was also possible when I had the time to fully focus on my design process. After a few weeks of more intensive collaboration after our P3, we were able find a clearer vision and position in our project. With a new found purpose of my thesis, the use for practice, and with a clear vision the fields of architecture and MBE seem to be integrated. With special thanks to Suzana, my first mentor, for the support and the collaborative thinking into really exploring to find an utopic realism.

The period starting around P3 in general has been stressful due to these circumstances of the pandemic. With a few unfortunate setbacks that were mostly out of my control, this period prior to P4 has been a very important time in which the integration and design is formed.

Towards P5

With a different twist on architecture, my focus of this graduation is to think and act in a cross disciplinary way, for the bigger picture, to eventually achieve a fair built environment. The exploration of our fascination and the integration of our different fields has led to a different process than 'normal' architectural projects. On top of the products required by Architecture, different insights, 'non-architectural' products and new found solutions will be presented as a holistic view on the built environment. Therefore towards the P5 I hope to show a project that should also trigger new and different questions on how to

achieve a long-term functioning place that in fact is also fair.

And finally, graduating in a team of two with a big ambition and from different tracks, is something that has been very challenging as it is not standard applicable in the current system of graduation within MSc. AUBS. Yet, it has been very valuable for my personal growth and it has allowed me to learn double as much as I would normally do. It has also pushed me out of my own Architecture bubble, to think in a way that not only is realistic but also applicable for now in the practice. In general I would recommend people to work together more as graduation may be a tough process. But if you have a partner in (academic) crime, things might be more tolerable, even in times when people do not seem to believe you. And of course in this rare occasion of graduating during a pandemic, it also motivates you to keep doing what you love and to keep you sane.

Graduation topic and its relevance

Relation research and design

During the preparation before the graduation, I wrote a theoretical thesis about the relation between socio-spatial inequality and uneven developed suburban areas. The information of this thesis is one on one applicable for the context of this graduation on tackling the problem of segregation as a result of gentrification. Furthermore in the process of Explore Lab my graduation thesis, has took on a different approach. Building on the contextual foundation of the theoretical thesis, the graduation thesis finds a more practical tone towards finding design principles for a long-term functioning urban development. The outcomes of this thesis is a framework of ten principles, visible in a long-term well-functioning neighbourhood. It is further used as a tool to analyse the location in its lack and in its potential. Giving a grip on the design context. Other insights, not necessarily included in the principles are processed as well, such as organic development of urban areas and not to fall into the habit of finding new/non-existing solutions, rather than finding what's applicable on the location itself partially also based on what is known.

Relation between graduation and Architecture master track

This graduation not only takes the position into architecture but also requires cross-disciplinary thinking for different solutions. Segregation due to gentrification is a common problem in the built environment and seeks for views from different disciplines in order to be solved. The role in this case as an architect has shifted towards a more non definable position that includes process thinking, urban planning, architectural designing, and more. In contrast to most projects seen in the master track of Architecture, we try to find evident-based principles, design-wise combined with financial and juridical thinking, to create solutions that are applicable now in order to achieve the greater bigger picture. As well as finding some realism in the utopia we try to create by facing ourselves with reality once in a while, for a check on how big the real problem is.

Relation between graduation topic and MSc AUBS

As mentioned earlier, this graduation topic is one that touches all fields and therefore is relevant to be researched in a way that also combines different fields as we barely see in practice and in academic environment. Because, in the end we need collaboration to solve bigger societal problems. Therefore to be able to talk in a language of another track has been very educational for me. This has led to different takes on design solutions, that not only feel like supporting a greater goal, but is also feasible in a way that is not 'paper architecture'. All in all we need all the field to work together to get through the process of developing, translating it into design and eventually also making it possible through building technology. It has been interesting to see that during this graduation process we have been able to speak to a lot of people and experts (from teachers to professors) from different tracks with their point of view on the bad side of gentrification. On my personal experience, this has been an eye-opener to see how different views can be and how false certain assumptions different tracks have for each other can be. Our faculty is in fact a place in which all studies are placed together, but on more social subjects have yet to be able to integrate different views together. I hope this graduation topic in some way may have sparked an action towards the faculty for more integration.

Relation between graduation and wider framework, with its ethical issues and dilemma's

This graduation is heavily leaning on the wider framework in terms of social and professional, while using the scientific base to give some guidance. The graduation aim is to create an utopic realism. But one of the dilemma's is, is to define what's best for the inhabitants. Through interviews we have tried to find the reasoning behind certain fixed figures and percentages in relation to what target groups need to be in a neighbourhood. But till this day, it is not known why this is all fixed on specific numbers. The graduation researches in this case has helped us to take a position in what's ethical to do so in a project. In the outcomes of both of Lena's and my research is that development in a way has a maximum size for it to be preferably collaborative. And in situations for the case of Wielewaal it is utmost important to take the location, with its history and its inhabitants, into account. Rather than just moving 'the problem' and start over the development. A more gentle and fair way is to develop in phases, giving enough time for feedback and to see result of certain decisions. So the ethical dilemma in this case, of not to be top down deciding what's 'best', is actually customization according to location and its context.

The potential applications in practice

The topic itself is one that is seen in practice. The case study we have taken, Wielewaal, is in the middle of this process of gentrification. Our findings in both research and design are therefore very applicable in practice. It is a proposal for the same situation but with recommendations found in the academic field for the practice. The findings of our collaborative graduation in general may create a new mindset to put impact first and to design to last. Our goal is not to only make a proposal that stays in the academic field but rather is a bridge between the academic field, the practice and a new utopia that can actually be realised.