



# AN URBAN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR MIXED-USE OFFICE AREA TRANSFORMATION

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## *REFLECTION*

*Master thesis S.C. Huijsmans*



## REFLECTION

Reflecting on this research, first, this research is positioned within its graduation laboratory. Subsequently, a reflection upon the research process and methodology is provided.

### Theory

#### Position within graduation laboratory

The graduation laboratory Adaptive Re-use provides a broad range for all types of graduation research related to the transformation of vacant real estate. Office vacancy covers a large part of this total amount of vacancy in the Netherlands. In the past years, students have executed many different graduation studies related to vacancy, and office vacancy in particular. Most of these studies however focussed on adaptation of unoccupied square meters on building level.

In the past years, studies about adaptation of vacant offices have been related to refitting vacancy for different purposes; e.g. temporary initiatives or the creative industry (Bruijning, 2016; Van der Hoek, 2016). Furthermore, research on the process of the transformation of vacant areas show the aspects of collaboration between public and private parties when tackling vacancy in company area (Labruyere, 2015). A tool, that supports involved parties in the process of initiating development projects in monofunctional office areas (Van Velzen, 2013) is designed, contributing to the problem as a supported joint-area approach. However, it remains largely unknown what is required for a transformation of a monofunctional office area into a mixed-use urban area. Studying the context of urban area development and mixed-use development formed the basis for this graduation research.

### Research method

#### Research process

The process of this research was iterative in nature. In order to be able to connect academic research (the theoretical framework) with the empiric research I have been going back and forth many times. Based upon these results I adjusted the conceptual model and the research design several times. However after handing in this report, the feeling that some parts can be adjusted remains. By experiencing this iterative process, my abilities being a researcher grew, contributing to the final product delivered for this graduation.

This graduation has opposed to answer one main research question according several sub-questions. However, it feels like this research has also yield more questions. Understanding what practice is about grew when I started my four months 'in practice' at a real estate developer while executing my case studies. During my first weeks of my internship I realized that the knowledge of Stebru on developments in the market and the roles of different actors take was of great value for understanding the complexity of my research. Executing the interviews and the expert consultations made me realize the relevance of my research. Many interviewees showed interest in research results. Talking to these people of different work fields not only provided me the opportunity to generate data for my research; it also gave me the opportunity to have a look at potential employers.

#### Theoretical framework

When starting this research, it was important to define which actors are involved in urban development, and what mixed-use includes, to be able to understand what an urban area transformation process into mixed-use is about. The structure of the semi-structured interview of the empirical research was based upon the information of the theoretical framework, complemented by my mentors, colleagues and my supervisor from Stebru.

For the theoretical framework I initially focused on the involved actors and mixed-use characteristics, while during the design of the urban development strategy I realized literature study on urban development strategies was required to design a strategy. The strategic activities of urban development strategies, found in literature study after executing empirical research, tuned out as a determinant factor for the whole structure of my research. Therefore the information about urban development strategies was added to the theoretical framework after the empirical research and strategy design. If this information would have been included from the start, the empirical research, and the interview structure, could have been based completely upon this urban development strategy, which would have contributed to the validity of this research.

### Empirical research

As just mentioned, the interview structure is based upon the theoretical framework. This framework however did not include the strategic activities of urban development strategies from the start, as they are used in the proposed urban development strategy. This means the validity of the research would have been higher if literature about urban development strategies had been included in the theoretical framework from the start. Only then these strategic activities could have been tested optimally within the empirical research.

Furthermore, as this graduation research is bound by means and time, only three case studies have been executed, and for only two of these interviews have been executed. Using different sources of data and research techniques increases the validity of the findings. By combining multiple observers, theories, methods, and empirical materials, the weakness or intrinsic biases and the problems that come from single method, single-observer and single-theory studies have been tried to overcome (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012). Because this research is bound by means and time, no survey has been used. However, this would have been a good method to question all current building owners/tenants in the development areas, so including their interests in the urban development strategy would be improved. Now, only one actor for each sample group (one developer, one municipal employee, one tenant and one investor) is questioned in an interview, so answers for each actor have been generalized. To increase the validity of this research a survey and multiple interviews would contribute to complete insight in the roles, objectives, and goals of all involved stakeholders in the area.

A dangerous aspect of executing case studies is the tendency to falsify assumptions. According to Flyvbjerg (2006) this is due to the fact that the researcher can adjust hypotheses during the research process by means of reflecting on the empirical data found in the case studies. By doing an internship at a real estate developer, and executing a major part of the interviews and expert consultations with market parties, it was hard to not get influenced by preconceptions. Therefore it was hard to safeguard the scientific research approach sometimes. However, the validity of this research is not influenced by these preconceptions by also discussing the results with public actors. Although a structure for the semi-structured interview was made, it turned out it was hard to stick to the order of the questions during the conversations. Questions regarding the financial aspect of area transformation hardly came up for discussion. Therefore this aspect has not been elaborated upon more in this research.

### Lessons drawing

Drawing up the lessons is based upon a comparative design, by at the same time reflecting upon the results described in the theoretical framework. The lessons are based upon issues that have been determined as important for the development process of the case studies. Expert consultation has contributed to collect feedback to adjust the lessons. However, the lessons should not be considered as complete as it concerns own interpretation. The expert consultations have been a substitute method to the intended expert pane. An expert panel would have brought a

lively discussion, which would have been interesting for this research. However, the use of expert consultation has brought the benefit of consulting actors separate from each other. This enables them to speak openly about their opinion, whereas a discussion could unintentionally influence their opinion during the panel. Since this research is bound by time and means, the learned lessons have not been framed optimal scientifically. This could be achieved by presenting the results to a more elaborated formal expert panel consisting of people from (Dutch) practice and scholars.

### Strategy design

Designing the strategy has been an iterative process, which was difficult because the requirements of the strategy were not clearly defined from the start. Once the variables were determined by executing a literature research on urban development strategies, the process of drawing up the strategy became easier. This iterative process has ensured that the model has become as it is now.

According to the practice validation, the strategy presumably describes the ideal situation of initiating a transformation project. However, the question can be asked whether the strategy is applicable in each situation. Since the transformation of an office area describes a very large complex project, it is presumed that these steps could not be applicable on each case. Thereby, the strategy design is based upon three case studies. The challenge now lies in the consistent implementation of the strategy; it lies with the actors, who must follow this strategy. However, the strategy has not been tested and therefore a successful transformation process cannot be guaranteed.

### Personal reflection

This graduation research has created the opportunity to dive into the process of transforming office areas. Vacancy is a huge, and thereby complex problem in the Netherlands. During the execution of the case studies, and in particular the interviews, I realized that the process of area development is even more complex than I thought it was. The different objectives of actors as they also appear in normal project developments did not seem to be the problem. I realized that the problem is much broader than that. Transformation of office areas requires a shift in behaviour for all involved parties. Where municipalities formerly were initiating in area development projects, they require a different approach these days. And where market parties formerly did not share any ideas, the future requires a more collaborative method.