

Reflection Paper

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Thesis "Under the Common Roof" - a community marketplace and elderly co-housing complex in Amsterdam

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Introduction

My graduation project "Under the Common Roof" seeks to create a mix-use community facility for Houthaven and Spaarndammer neighbourhood that strengthen their connections through the theme of urban nature.

This project stems from finding the potential commonality between two distinctively different neighbourhood. What they can share from the site, as well as what they can share from the scope of the city. I find my answer in the continuous urban green area which stretches from the site towards the edge of the city – the urban nature. To explore how to implement this theme as a guideline for architectural design, the research starts from two perspectives – the site context and the urban hinterland.

Studio theme - Harvest

The studio theme 'Harvest' offered several unique perspectives and methods for the research on the urban hinterland.

Firstly, the studio's focus on circularity inspired me to rethink the potential of making building materials from waste. Combined with the theme of my project – urban nature, I focus on studying making biodegradable building materials from agricultural waste from a specific area of Amsterdam's local hinterland. The biodegradable character of these materials offers a future where they left no harm after their service life, thus aligned with the essence of circularity from another perspective.

Secondly, to analyse the feasible scenario of making and using this natural building material, my thematical research relies heavily on the methodology of material flow analysis (MFA). It offers a way to systematically understand the current situation of material between the city and the hinterland through quantifying different material flows and eventually provides a promising potential for re-organizing the waste streams.

Last but not the least, on an architectural scale, I implement the building materials from my research as the 'toolbox' for my design project. Further research is done according to highlight the tectonic of these materials in architecture.

Social context - Life

Apart from the thematical research on biodegradable building materials, I also did several qualitative research to understand the current situation of the two site neighbourhoods. I was very keen to understand the specific need of the people from the neighbourhood. Through several site visits and interviews with the staff from the neighbourhood centre, I discovered the spaarndammer neighbourhood is facing the decline of social housing and the growth of elderly populations. These discoveries are considered one of the main programmes of the project. However, due to the limitation

of working on my own, I was not able to interview real residents, thus the understanding of the neighbourhood is less sufficient. But regardless of the limitations, I tried to collect real information as much as possible.

On the other hand, to bring in a new nature-related public programme as the highlight of the project, I research the common civic activities in Amsterdam. By mapping different places of civic activities inside the city, I was able to pick out 'the local market' as a suitable programme for my design. Local market builds a connection between people and local products, local nature, as well as neighbours.

Looking Back

I consider the process of my graduation project is like solving a puzzle without knowing the complete image. During the very beginning, I think I was barely on the track in the studio because I was unfamiliar with the theme and also not clear about my interest in technical subjects, which makes it very difficult to start with a clear goal. During P1 and P2, I constantly pivot my design theme from a very generic scope, trying to find a clear connection between the technical research and the design programme.

When looking back at all of these struggles, I summarize two main aspects which I should have improved. The first and the most important one is to have a clear interest in the beginning and stick to it. This interest will form not only the theme of the research but also construct the highlight of the design. Apart from this, it is also crucial to keep exploring different potentials and make decisions according to the design position. Personally, I consider the process of research as making the bricks for the building. The bricks are an important ingredient; however, it is also homogenous when not being designed. Therefore, research is not the final answer, but a resourceful material that has different potential. When making decisions during the design, it is always useful to reflect on the research theme and design positions.

Going Forward

During P4 I will focus on the technical aspect of my design. The main material will be drawings and experimental models. For the final period of my graduation will look at the method of representation. I would like to experiment with multiple graphics to show my project from the perspective of the people, instead of the designer. The graphic scenarios will take place around the important space and architectural elements, such as the balcony, the garden, and the roof space, thus demonstrating the relationship between the material, the space, the architecture, and people's life.