Reflection on 'Street Life' - graduation project by Marten Reijnen - 4129660

This reflection on the graduation process applies as an explanation of the results of research and design of the graduation project 'Street Life'.

Linking research and design
The project is defined by a rapidly changing context in Vietnam. The relation between research and design is very clear. The research showed that, for people to feel comfortable in public space, they have to be able to relate themselves to it. Culture and tradition are in that case very important as context. Also, designing for the needs of the people was found to be important to determine the use of public space. A thorough investigation of the use of space within the Vietnamese culture was carried out in order to come to basic principles for design. These principles, derived from theory on Vietnamese public and private spaces, were applied in the designs.

The first design showed an alternative to the current ways of development in Vietnam in a way that breaks less with tradition and is more embedded in the local culture. The second design showed a transformation of a current new development in order to be more interesting for people to use.
For both designs, research also led to a 'reality-check'. A new way of thinking about capitalism, creating shared value, was found to be extremely useful to underpin the design with an economic model. Once again, the research findings were put into practice in the design.

Linking studio and the individual project
The Vertical Cities Asia studio is a mixed architecture and urbanism studio taking part in a research and design competition. The name suggests a type of workshop in high-rise buildings, however, it has more to do with building compact and dense cities as the target is to reach 100.000 inhabitants per square kilometre. For this challenge, a specific location has been appointed by the organisation; this year the site was found 15 kilometres west of Hanoi, Vietnam's capital.
After a lot of research and analysis, the decision was taken not to reach the set criteria for density on that specific site, because the group found that the site was not the right place for this high density. Reaching that density was established elsewhere, in places more suitable for such ways of development.

However, the site visit and the research the project group did, led to the findings that there are many issues concerning the current ways of

development on the competition site - notwithstanding that these issues play a role in many locations in (South) East Asia. Not satisfied with the ways the competition project dealt with these issues and intrigued by the buzzling, active street life of Hanoi, I decided to continue working on the competition site. However, I led go of the density criteria, as they were found to be irrelevant for the project site.

The Vertical Cities Asia competition always has a theme. This year's theme was 'everybody harvests'. At the start of the studio, a lot of research was done on this topic. However, the research and analysis showed that the site had a lot more important issues to be addressed than urban farming or something alike. It was decided to address the issues of environment, transportation and housing instead of following the theme. In my individual project, I followed the same line of thinking.

Studio and personal methodologies
As the studio semester takes part in a competition, coming to a design had to happen rather rapidly. This meant firstly desk analysis and later also a site visit. This research was combined in a research book. At that point a methodology for design was made to come to design principles within a regional masterplan. In the last few weeks, these principles were applied on a smaller scale.

In my personal project, a continuation of the competition, I started with a lot of theory research. This formed the missing part in the methodology to come to a more precise and detailed design. Findings from this literature research led to massive changes in the initial competition design.

This methodological process has been quite different from other studios. In general, graduation studios within the department of Urbanism start with literature research, then coming to site analysis, followed by design. In the process I followed, the methodology was more chaotic, but also much more efficient in my opinion. Since the site was given, the thorough analysis could immediately start. The, rather generic, design principles were applied and made more specific coming to the final design. After the competition, with a finished design, a theory research began. This research was, because of the knowledge gained in field work and analysis, much more specific from the beginning. The final design, then, benefitted massively from this kick-start.

I would argue that starting with specific site analysis already a lot of the theoretical research that could be undertaken. Starting with that theory

research with the knowledge of the analysis can more easily be made specific. The danger is that the topic that the student wants to address is his/her graduation project is not apparent on the chosen site.

Firstly, in my case, I was not sure about my topic from the start. This happens to many graduating students. However, due to the competition and the focus on site analysis, I had the time to establish my focus and later on do the required theory research.

Secondly, one could argue that on the site chosen such a diversity of research topics can be found that there will always be one of one's likings.

'Street Life' in a wider social context
The project addresses the loss of street life in new developments in (South) East Asia. This widespread issue leads to a loss of place and can be seen as an echo of Modernist designs. However, rapid urbanisation and external influences on the real estate market make for standardised ways of development, often inspired on Western suburbs.

'Street Life' attempts to propose a different way of development; more within the local context, culture and tradition. This, however, does not mean everything has to remain the same, as long as there is no break with the past, development can take place. This is applied in an alternative design for new developments, as well as in a transformation of the already built neighbourhoods that are indeed breaking with tradition.

The project aims at being a prototype for the widespread issues on public space and the real estate market in (South) East Asian countries, however, mainly focused on the specifically Vietnamese context. The relevance of the project extends the borders of the project site by far. The solutions found and ideas offered in 'Street Life' can be applied throughout the whole (South) East Asian region, making the project rich and purposeful.