

REFLECTION PAPER | ARCHITECTURE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

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In this reflection paper the results of my research and design will be discussed. My final year was not only important for my professional growth as a (future) architect, but also for my personal growth. For this reason, I have experienced my graduation as one of the most exciting and difficult moments in my life as an architecture student. I will reflect on three different aspects of my graduation process; the social context, the relation between research and design and the potential application in practice and.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PROJECT AND THE WIDER SOCIAL FRAMEWORK

My graduation process actually started when I had to choose for a studio in May last year. At the moment I wanted to enrol for the Complex Project Studio, I noticed the Cross Domain Health studio. Although I was not specifically interested in healthcare architecture, many aspects of the studio did sound logical and at the same time familiar to me. I prefer to think about design solutions with social relevance and not just design buildings which are mainly based on aesthetics. After five years of architecture I realized that nearly all my designs are mainly based on the user of my buildings. The Health@BK Lab offered me the opportunity to truly focus on the user-driven design approach, which was an interesting way of working.

The research and design have both a strong relationship with the wider social framework, since the current developments in the Dutch elderly care were the starting point of this project. Our aging population and the financial cuts in the long-term elderly care encouraged me to rethink the existing Dutch elderly housing. The Dutch government decided that elderly have to live in their own environment as long as possible, but are our homes appropriate for this radical change? Since our contemporary way of building is mainly focused on privacy, comfort and individualism, loneliness is a common problem among this group of vulnerable people. Instead of focusing on the negative phenomenon of loneliness, I decided to investigate how the positive counterpart, social interaction, can be stimulated through architecture. This resulted in several design principles that can be used in the design of a residential building for the elderly. These principles can be seen as recommendations for other students and architects.

The design incorporates these design principles and other living preferences of the elderly. Although the building must enable aging in place (Woonkeur requirements), the apartments should be attractive for other kinds of households as well. This aspect of circularity was crucial for my design, because the percentage of elderly will decrease after 2040. This project made me realize how important the adaptability and flexibility of a building is. If we all decide it is important to build more elderly housing, these buildings will be vacant after 2040. Therefore, the designed residential complex is suitable for all ages and households.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND DESIGN

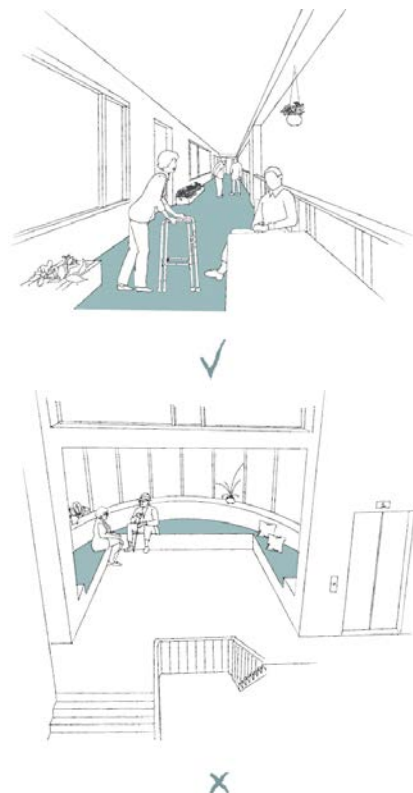
Research into the social interaction of the elderly was an important part of my graduation. The several interviews with the elderly made me able to better empathize with this group of people and their specific needs. In my opinion, this kind of research should be done more often at our faculty, because most of the projects are only designed from the perspective of the architect. In the initial phase of our Health@BK Lab sessions we had the walkability



workshop, which made me realize it is important to experience your building from a different perspective than my your view. There are so many things you never realize until you have actually been in a wheelchair. It was way more exhausting than I considered before and the eye level confused me. Most of the people look straight over your head and have a conversation with the caregiver instead of you. In my design I tried to take the eye level of the wheelchair into account, for example with the heights of the windows and architectural elements.

Understanding the daily routine and social interaction of the future user of my building was the main focus of my research. At the early stage of the design process this extensive research was very useful, because it helped me to clarify the conditions for the design. As the design elaborated, my attention for this research diminished. A few weeks before my P4, my teacher noticed that there are still some opportunities in the link between research and design. After 9 months working on the same project, it is sometimes hard to still see these opportunities. These last changes in the design make the relationship between research and design even stronger.

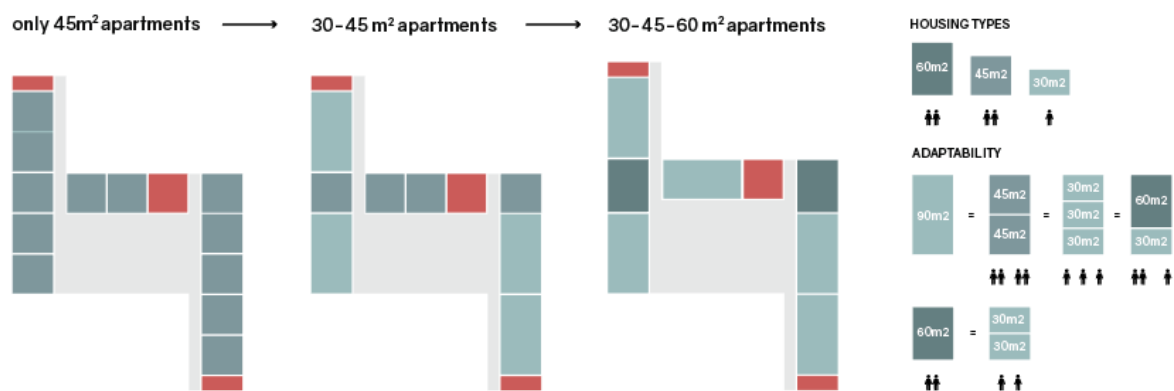
My research into the informal encounter among the elderly continued during the design phase of the project. The collection of architectural elements that stimulate social interaction increased during the entire graduation process, because of different conversations, observations and site visits. The idea was to investigate whether the social architectural elements really work or whether they turn out to be social utopias. Unfortunately, there was a limitation in this kind of research. During the first interviews with the elderly I was able to test several architectural elements and the results were really interesting and useful for my design. However, it was not possible to evaluate all elements due to the lack of time. My research and design are now a combination of examined and unexamined elements, which is a limitation. Therefore, I would love to present my design (through VR) to my target group and learn from their remarks.



POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS OF THE RESULTS IN PRACTICE

Since I was cooperating with a healthcare organisation in Amsterdam, my project is far more realistic compare to my previous work. A collaborating with such a professional client allowed me to prepare myself to the professional practice, which was fun and challenging at the same time. During the entire process, more and more people were informed about my research and design – and of course, they all had an opinion about it. Although all this (constructive) criticism was sometimes difficult for me, it brought my project to a next level. I have had several conversations with professionals from different disciplines in order to make well-considered design decisions.

During the process there was one crucial moment, which was the most difficult moment for me at the same time. The healthcare organisation visited me and my teacher at our faculty and we discussed the floor plans of the apartments. At that time, there were only apartments of 45m², which are according to the care organization not affordable for single households. After this session I started working on a more flexible and adaptive floor plan. The idea of building a smart building that is circular and futureproof was the guiding principle from that moment on. I believe this way of thinking will become increasingly important in our profession. We are building the future, but at the same time we cannot predict this future precisely.



Eventually, the building has a variety of apartments of 30, 45 and 60m², which can be arranged flexibly. The healthcare organisation is so enthusiastic about the development of the adaptive floor plan, that they might want to apply it in practice! I guess there is no better way to conclude a graduation project.