

Iconic projects as catalysts for brownfield redevelopments

The developers' perspective towards the conditions of iconic projects that incite brownfield redevelopments



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Reflection

The final chapter contains a reflection on the graduation research that will touch upon a number of topics. First of all, the position of the research within the education will be discussed. This is followed by a reflection on the scientific and societal relevance of the research. Finally, the methods used to conduct this research will be discussed in §8.3. Reflections on the research process from a personal point of view and on the ethical concerns encountered are presented in Appendix XI.

8.1 Position of research

This graduation thesis is part of the *Sustainable Area Transformations (in the Netherlands)* graduation laboratory, provided by the Urban Development Management (UDM) chair of the Management in the Built Environment (MBE) department. This chair investigates design concepts, principles and instruments that support effective strategies that can both produce and promote sustainable and resilient urban environments. These strategies aim to shape the behaviour of stakeholders by their decisions and actions, and intent to create networks and collaborations to implement change in urban areas (Urban Development Management, n.d.).

Some of the strongest demands that significantly dominate the current UDM debates with regard to the resilience of urban environments in the Netherlands, are about the importance of regenerating existing urban areas and about the ongoing high demand for housing particularly. These two debates are inextricably linked, as the renewal of existing urban areas simultaneously addresses the housing demand, which is particularly strong in already urbanised areas (Delft University of Technology, 2018). The aim of this graduation research was to provide more insights into the conditions of iconic projects that could incentivise private real estate developers to (re)develop properties in brownfield areas. This anticipates on the fact that it is still unclear how the strong residential demand in already urbanised will substantially be administered (Delft University of Technology, 2018).

By conducting retrospective case studies on brownfield area redevelopments of best practices, the conditions of iconic projects that incentivised surrounding (re)developments and their effectiveness have been explored. By conducting a prospective case study on a brownfield which is on the verge of being redeveloped, implementations of these conditions in practice have been suggested. This fits research into the regeneration of already existing urban area. Insights into the effectiveness and implementations of conditions of iconic projects that can spur brownfield redevelopments, support effective solutions that can both produce and promote sustainable urban environments. Moreover, it supports more applied research on possible design principles and governance models for sustainable and successful area transformations. This research contributes to increasing the success of deploying iconic projects with the intention of stimulating further project developments. Thereby reduces uncertainty with regard to the fulfilling this intention, which again fits research into successful regenerations of existing urban areas: brownfields in this respect.

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8.2 Relevance

In this paragraph, the relevance of the research will be discussed by reflecting on the scientific and societal relevance individually.

Scientific relevance

The development of iconic projects has become a popular tool for municipalities to generate catalytic effects in regeneration processes or to boost the image of transformation areas. Iconic projects can thus be deployed to speed up the process of meeting the high residential demands, particularly by means of catalysing surrounding developments.

What has been found remarkable, is that many studies yet focussed on the value and impact of iconic projects, however have not by definition explored the specific conditions of iconic projects that catalyse surrounding area transformations. Using the insights in these conditions will increase the chance of success for brownfield redevelopments. Moreover, it provides for opportunities to better cope with the urbanisation trend, as more knowledge is now available as regards to stimulating (re)developments.

Another remarkable finding during the research process was the fact that there is very little literature to be found regarding the behaviour and motives of private real estate developers. The developers perspective is not widely scientifically substantiated. This is against expectations, since they play a key role in fulfilling the needs and demands of society.

This research has contributed to the aforementioned shortcomings within the state of the art literature, by providing a clear overview of the conditions of iconic projects that have the ability to spur real estate developers to develop in brownfields. Obligated to remark, though, is that the conclusions are derived from three case studies in Rotterdam. The generalisability of this research falls behind these three cases studied, as the case studies conducted can not be considered representatives of all other brownfield redevelopment cases. However, this research is still interesting and useful for future redevelopment teams of Dutch brownfields in general, knowing that limited information is yet available.

Societal relevance

The development of iconic projects in redevelopment areas are often initiated or financially supported by municipalities for several reasons, e.g. to polish up the image of the city, to create or increase a flow of tourism or to create a catalysing effect with regard to raising capital. Despite the usually high investments costs and ambitions that go with such developments, municipalities rarely know which conditions actually achieve their desired spillover effects. Therefore, this research went into the latter.

This research specifically focussed on brownfield area transformations. These area redevelopments are preferred in Dutch policies (Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Milieu, 2017). Also, 35% (high-growth scenario) to 80% (small growth scenario) of the housing needs until 2050 can be realised in un(der)utilised areas and vacant buildings within the existing city (Brink, 2017). Since the market currently takes up a quarter of the Dutch housing program within the city centres only (Verheul & Daamen, 2017), research into incentives that could speed up this process is substantially relevant. This is supported by the fact that many brownfield areas in the Netherlands are currently (on the verge of) being transformed. Moreover, all practitioners that have been involved in this research have been very enthusiastic about the issue this research tries to tackle. They have sincerely showed interest in the final research output, which contributes to the practical relevance of this research too.

Municipalities have been offered a better perspective in design principles that could be strategically deployed when tackling brownfield redevelopments, by providing an overview of the conditions of iconic projects that spur surrounding (re)developments. Subsequently, the first preliminary steps in the direction of meeting the short to medium-long term residential demand in urbanised areas can be set in stone.

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8.3 Methodology

In this paragraph, the methodology will be discussed by reflecting on the several methods and techniques that have been applied individually.

Literature study

The goal of the literature study was to gain better understanding of the research concepts, by identifying and getting familiar with a substantial amount of related literature so as to create literature awareness. The three main research concepts studied were 'Urban Area Development', 'Iconic projects as a Catalyst' and the 'Motives of Real Estate Developers'. The expectation was to formulate a concrete answer to the research questions corresponding to the concepts, which would provide for direct operationalisation of the conceptual model. This turned out slightly different and, as a consequence, the operationalisations of the developers' motives and iconic project conditions

had to be done based on less concrete literature findings. It succeeded, nevertheless, but it is not ideal to start empirical research with as the literature findings were the primary source for the foundation of the empirical research.

Case studies

A qualitative research has been applied, consisting of three in-depth holistic case studies. A qualitative research method has been chosen, as the focus of this research is on motives and incentives which is difficult to quantify. The cases have been carefully selected by using extensive selection criteria. Looking back, their findings are considered very valuable for the research and, should the research be redone, the same cases would be chosen again. However, conducting three in-depth case studies is something that would be reconsidered. This appeared to be a lot of document study compared to the time available for the research. Especially considering the fact that these case studies all involve many stakeholders, many single project developments and have quite an extensive (development) history that should be taken into account. Despite the workload that accompanied this choice, the level of detail remained high. The prospective case study, however, has been studied less in-depth. That did not affect the research quality, since this case was studied to make the results transferable to practice by means of suggestions for implementation. Moreover, the main results necessary to answer the main research question derived from the retrospective case studies. All in all, the preliminary general context analysis on Rotterdam, the extensive document studies on the redevelopment visions and processes, consequently the redevelopment process visualisations by means of timelines, the iconic assessment method that has been developed and applied, the extensive property development analysis (Appendix I, II and III), the provided impressions and the interview summaries, ensured a qualitative and extensive exploration of the brownfield redevelopments.

Both the Wilhelminapier and Katendrecht have proven to be very suitable case study locations to explore the influence of iconic projects on the developers motives, as they have much in common however differ a lot as well. They are both successful and advanced area developments with many appointed iconic projects, however have a totally different atmosphere and iconic values. Also, much information can be found regarding these area developments and the involved developers have all been very willing to contribute to the research.

The interviews with project developers and managers were very valuable from the research perspective, as well as from a personal point of view. I had the ability to speak to many practitioners of exceptional development merit, both from public parties, private parties and foundations. From an academic stance, this was very useful as much insights into the perspective of the developing parties was gained. From a personal stance, this was very useful as this provided the opportunity to get to know more development companies, as well as more feeling by the more 'dry' document study that was explored prior to the interviews. Though most practitioners that have been approached were willing to contribute to this graduation research, this has been less successful for the retrospective case. This had to do with the fact that most developments on M4H were either in a very early phase, or they in the middle of the development phase. The first made it hard to find suitable developers to interview, as there was a lack of concrete development plans that could be discussed. The latter made it hard to interview development managers from the municipality, as they simply were very busy streamlining all developments and initiatives at that moment. Ideally, more interviews were conducted for the M4H case study. Then, the recommendations regarding the implementation of iconic project conditions could have been more detailed.

All in all, the used methods have been appropriate to effectively meet the main aim of the research and to effectively conduct in-depth holistic case studies, given the final level of detail of the investigation.

Evaluation Panel

During the final stage of the research process, an evaluation panel has been organised with ten consultants and managers from the department Development & Investments of Brink Management / Advies. The main objective was to evaluate the lessons learned from the case studies and the cross-case analysis, in order to validate results. Moreover, this session provided input for recommendations for further research. It has been deployed by means of a discussion, organised by the presentation of triggering statements derived from the results at that moment. Despite the fact that it feels like more could have been get out of it (because the cross-case analysis was not yet fully completed at that time and therefore could not entirely be evaluated), it has been very useful to do. The lessons learned have proven to be very valuable for the research and the expert panel made me zoom out again and put the results in a wider perspective.

8.4 Reflection on ethical concerns

Within this paragraph, the ethical concerns encountered while doing the research and the ethical concerns concerning the application of the results in practice will be reflected.

Ethical concerns regarding research

This research does not involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent. All participants participate completely voluntarily in the research and are free to withdraw their consent at any time, without giving a reason. As a consequence, all obtained data will then be destroyed. These rights, and more, have been documented in an informed consent that can be found in Appendix IV. Moreover, this research does not involve active deception of the participants, neither is it about sensitive topics. As this research is conducted while doing a graduation internship at Brink Management / Advies, this could be considered an ethical concern, as the information obtained during the interviews will also be available for them. However, all interviewees were aware of the fact that this research is being conducted while doing a graduation internship at Brink. In fact, all contact details of the interviewees came from the external mentors at Brink Management / Advies. As such, no ethical concerns have been encountered during the research process.

Ethical concerns regarding application in practice

No moral issues have been identified as regards to the implementation of the research findings in practice, as no potential for harm has been encountered whatsoever. As a consequence, the application of this research does not encounter any ethical concerns.

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8.5 Reflection on research process

This paragraph reflects on the research process of the past year. The preliminary remark has to be made that this paragraph has been written from a personal point of view.

Towards the P2

In September 2018, the graduation lab started with an introduction to all graduation topics within the four chairs of the MBE department. For me, this was pretty overwhelming as the choice for the topic and first mentor had to be made within the same week. After all the presentations, lots of reading, brainstorm sessions and discussions with fellow students and teachers, I knew I wanted to graduate within the UDM chair. The creation of better places through architecture have sparked my interest early on. Besides, urban area redevelopments are often very dynamic with a high degree of complexity. This makes urban area redevelopments challenging to research and ensured an interesting journey.

Moreover, I find it very interesting to look at the behaviour of developers. Eventually, I would like to become a developer myself and this subject was not touched upon in the master program. In addition, the transformation of areas or even complete cities through architectural icons simply amazes me. It is therefore not really coincidental that my favourite city is Rotterdam. With that in mind, I managed to create a both very interesting as well as a very relevant goal that I wanted to achieve by means of this thesis: to gain better understanding about the catalysing impact of iconic buildings in brownfield areas that could incentivise private real estate developers to redevelop.

Against many views, I have experienced doing the literature review as one of the most fun stages within the research. It felt like the first semester really gave me the opportunity to become an expert in the research field (although I now realise, after the empirical research and the graduation internship, that I am absolutely not an expert at all). Moreover, much literature could be found on the main research topics which made it a challenge to really show my own stance towards these findings. It felt like each day I became more and more experienced within the topic. I am very happy with the fact the research topic truly intrinsically motivated me.

Towards the P4

Once the empirical research started, it soon became clear that practice is absolutely not equal to theory. During the literature review, I really focussed on the main concepts of this research. During the interviews, it quickly became clear again that, of course, not only iconic projects play a role in development decisions, but many other factors too. This was already known from the start, but that

confrontation during the interviews sometimes made it hard to believe that this research really contributes to science and society and will actually be of use. The interviews made me realise as well that urban area development really is a people's job and something you never do alone. During the interviews, many interviewees referred to each other and almost every interviewee knew the other interviewees I was going to see. Even with such large and complex area developments that last for decades, the urban development field in practice truly appeared to be a 'small world'.

I have experienced the phase between the P3 and the P4 as most challenging. Many analysis were done and many information had been obtained. Translating this into concrete conclusions was something I struggled with, as I was looking for a perfect structured process and pre-structured output. This appeared to be unrealistic. This part of the research process is much more iterative. It took a while to realise and accept that the results of the qualitative case studies obtained from subjective interview findings, could not be made as tangible and explicit as research findings from quantitative nature.

Personal and study goals

Within the personal study goals of the P1, I wanted to ensure that I communicate clearly and unambiguously, regardless of what the final result will be, in order to contribute to scientific literature. That requires skills such as constantly having a critical and reflective stance towards your own research. I think I could say that I have made progress regarding my academic stance after doing a research of such scope. Writing a master thesis requires an iterative process and is a largely self-directed and autonomous activity, which for me was the most challenging part. As a consequence, I have not only learned a lot about the research topics, but just as much about the research process. Many moments have occurred where I had to figuratively take three steps back in order to go one step forward. Most of the time, that has led to better results. This research learned me to successfully deal with this. As I have mentioned within the goals of my P2 reflection as well, I wanted to stay as ambitious in the stages that followed after the P2. This is something highly personal to judge. In my feeling, I kept challenging myself and definitely did not chose the easy road. Looking back, I am glad that I have followed this journey and created a graduation thesis that is something I can proudly share with people in the field, as well as with those that just find the topic as interesting and appealing as I do. As for both my research and my personal objectives, I am happy to say that my goals have been achieved.

The three mentors that guided me during my thesis played an important role in these achievements. They each have their own expertise and I therefore was able to receive support on all the fields that this research touches upon. They kept asking critical questions and triggered interesting discussions, which enabled me to truly have a critical and reflective stance towards my own thesis. It has proven to be a fruitful and pleasant cooperation and I am very happy with such a nice and useful support system.

