LESSONS LEARNED
Reflection on Research and Design

Introduction to research topic and design project

This research and design project has centred around the social and spatial dynamics in Pendrecht, a neighbourhood in the south of Rotterdam. The initial trigger that directed my interest to this 'Southern Garden City'[1] was the clash between the high-minded ideals which the urbanist Lotte Stam-Beese envisioned and the way it is perceived today. Being one of the first woman urbanists, Lotte designed Pendrecht with great attention to the quality of living for the working-class, creating a coherent spatial and social whole. However, this carefully engineered community did not prove to be resilient. In only forty years' time it degraded to an anonymous and dangerous neighbourhood. The stigma was firmly embedded and has become a self-fulfilling prophesy ever since.

After some struggling on how to relate and position my project within this context, the research developed a focus on the public domain and its potential to host a wide range of interactions between fellow residents. This highlighted the need to facilitating socio-cultural exchange so that residents gain a better understanding of each other's spheres of living, thereby promoting connection and social cohesion. Pendrecht may rightly boast in its richness of cultural diversity and local initiatives, but as long as these hidden away behind closed doors instead of expressed in the public domain, the stigma of unsafety and fear of the 'unknown other' will persist. The neighbourhood needs a public building with a diverse program, in which networks can form and collectivity may slowly develop. It will serve as an anchor point where residents feel ownership, and which stimulates participation, well-being, and talent development.

Relation between graduation project and master programme

Supposedly Frank Lloyd Wright once said: *"We create our buildings and then they create us."* I believe we easily underestimate the profound influence the built environment has on our functioning, not only on a personal scale, but also on the community we form (or don't). In my opinion, the design of a building should therefore not be seen as a pure functional undertaking. How people use and experience the space, and how it adapts to changing needs is equally important. I wanted to use my graduation project to discover more about this social impact of the built environment and to learn which tools we have as architects to design user-friendly buildings with added public value.

Within this social side of architecture, the segmentation between residents in Pendrecht intrigued me. During the course Architectural Theory, I worked on the coding of space and segmentation that occurs in Metaxourgio, what used to be a working-class neighbourhood in the northwest of Athens. The socio-spatial context of Metaxourgio is very different from Pendrecht, but on some points the dynamics proved quite similar. In both instances, the lack of interaction and dependency on (social) networks between collectives solidifies existing thresholds and sustains stigmatization and fear of the Other. The Architectural Theory course resulted in a search for unterritorialized ground between residents, a space where people belonged because they did not not belong. Though I enjoyed this course, I felt that in its abstraction it lost touch with reality as it is experienced in day-to-day city life. By enrolling in the Veldacademie I hoped to gain a more practical perspective on social dynamics in the built environment, and how an architect can apply this knowledge in the design process.

---

[1] It was referred to as a 'Southern Garden City' when it was designed and built in the 1950's. This term reflects the design principles of abundant outside space and greenery for all residents.

Value of work approach and used methods

The research leading up to the design can be roughly categorised in two sections: a literature review into the socio-historical context of Pendrecht and field work in which the experience and user perspective of residents was analysed. The latter was achieved through a combination of site visits, street interviews, in-depth interviews, and workshops with residents.

This approach added an awareness of the past that helped to understand the intention behind the design and why this did not prove to work in the long term. Also, through this I could relate to the older residents who had moved to Pendrecht when it was a newly built and very promising neighbourhood. Most importantly, a broad view on the neighbourhood and its development helped to identify the underlying cause of the perceived unsafety on the street. The need for a place where socio-cultural exchange may take occur and local initiatives can connect was a direct outcome of the research. However, the way in which this view could be translated into a resilient architectural intervention was mainly inspired by the results from the fieldwork. These fieldwork findings showed the current needs and shortcomings in the neighbourhood, and therefore also the practical ways in which interaction could be facilitated.

Reciprocity between research and design principles

I started analysing the social and spatial development of Pendrecht, trying to gain a nuanced view on the neighbourhood as a whole. Within this broad context of time and space, I struggled quite a bit with how to position myself and my research. Throughout the process my research shifted between topics such as anonymity, ways of informal interaction, feeling of belonging, spatial and social fragmentation, collectiveness and participation. Looking back, I realise that my starting point was much too broad, and I should have made it more specific. However, I was afraid that this restriction would leave out options and factors that would prove to be key to an integral design concept.

The relevance of my research on the public domain laid in the fact that it considered several different user groups. By only focussing on one group, the result would have little to say about the social dynamics and resilience of the neighbourhood as a whole. Specifying a location, Plein 1953, did greatly help in narrowing the research and formulating conclusions. Though the public domain is an interesting topic (especially its combination of physical borders and informal borders through codes of conduct), it tends towards urbanism which makes the step towards an architectural intervention difficult. It would probably be a more suitable topic for an urbanist graduation project.

Relevance in the larger social, professional, and scientific framework

The feeling of community is shown to decrease in larger cities, among which Rotterdam. My research uses Pendrecht as a case study but is also applicable to many other modernist neighbourhoods. As informal networks among neighbours decrease, the perceived anonymity and unsafety grows. If this individualistic use of the city continues, Rotterdam will slowly turn into an archipelago of enclaves, where each individual constructs their own city from these enclaves while avoiding the unpredictable 'in-between' as much as possible. However, when designed and programmed carefully, this 'in-between' public space has a great potential for bridging the gap between different backgrounds and ideas. As a linking element where cultural and social exchange can take place, a successful public space is a cornerstone for safe, resilient, and inclusive cities.

In this project I have sought to create a good public domain in and around a multifunctional building with a program that contributes to the local social fabric among different residents. I believe that the possibilities for interaction, talent development and the well-being of residents that these buildings facilitate, have a profound influence on the overall social resilience of a neighbourhood. I hope that the value of local networks will be recognised, and we will invest in buildings as this one to revitalise our cities.

Transferability of the results

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, I believe the value of a public building for local initiatives, talent development and participation have a positive impact on the well-being of residents and the neighbourhood as a whole. This is not only true in the case of Pendrecht, but also in many city districts where the social cohesion and perceived safety is lacking. The value of these facilities is directly relatable to such neighbourhoods, though the architectural translation dependents on the specific situation.

Key design principles that I believe prove valuable in most of these cases are mixed-use, flexibility and participation. Note that functional mixing is only beneficial if the functions have a certain reciprocal interest in each other's presence. The total has to be more than the sum of the parts, and this is a challenge that the design may achieve. Overlap between functions through mixed-use space can foster a curious dynamic between the functions, which may result in productive interactions. Flexibility is closely related to mixed-use, as the space has to easily adapt to various needs and uses. The ingredients that work well together in the mix, vary by type of environment, and depend on the specific situation. Participation of local stakeholders and residents may give insight into which ingredients, or functions, are needed to strengthen the local network.

Participation is a tool that Lotte Stam-Beese missed when she designed Pendrecht as the new ideal for social living. She tried to engineer her idea of community top-down, but her efforts proved unsuccessful. By working the other way around and developing the 'how and why' of the design through fieldwork and other ways of participation, the result will be well embedded in its context. This bottom-up view, learning from the local expertise and the context rather than simply projecting one's own assumptions and short-sighted solutions, is the key to a well-founded and resilient design.