

REFLECTION - RISKS AND SUCCESS FACTORS IN TRANSFORMING URBAN AREAS

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This paragraph provides a reflection of the process and products of this research. First, the position within the chosen graduation laboratory is elaborated on, followed by a reflection on the research methods and results, and concludingly a personal reflection is provided.

Position within graduation laboratory & scientific relevance

The graduation laboratory Adaptive Re-use offers a wide variety of research topics related to adapting the built environment to suit new conditions. Office vacancy poses a challenge that requires the upgrading of a huge number of affected buildings. Most research by former students focused on the causes and effects of office vacancy and adaption on a building level (Borst, 2017; Damwijk, 2015). In the past years, more studies were conducted about the transformation from monofunctional towards mixed-use. The location characteristics were analysed that increase the risk of structural office vacancy (Van Wingerden, 2013), and different tools were developed, for instance to support the initiation process (Van Velzen, 2013) or to determine strategic activities (Huijsmans, 2018).

However, no research has been done on risks and success factors in the process of area transformation. My research fills that scientific gap and contributes to the problem how areas can be reused and updated in a socially, environmentally and economically sustainable way. With the focus on managerial dimensions of construction processes, by exploring the management of risks, my topic fits in the master track MBE and in the master programme MSc Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences.

Research design and methods

The chosen qualitative approach proved to be the right choice due to the complexity of the topic. Since every case is unique and risk and success factors are case-specific, it was logical to select two case studies and to conduct interviews with experts to identify risks and success factors.

Internal validity or credibility determines the consistency of the research. One way to increase credibility was the use of the Delphi method with two rounds that allowed the application of respondent validation (Bryman, 2016). This means that findings obtained from the first round were submitted back to the experts to receive confirmations through the second round. This ensured that the studied issues were understood correctly. Furthermore, an interview guide was prepared which increased consistency of interviews held. However, it was not possible to achieve equal circumstances, as due to time limitations of interviewees some interviews were shorter and not all questions could be asked. This factor reduced internal validity. Finally, the use of different types of data collection methods (case-study documents, expert interviews, questionnaires) established triangulation, which is a recognized method to establish internal validity, generalizability of the results and to reduce intrinsic bias.

The options for the second Delphi round were to use a questionnaire with a broad audience or a focus group session in form of a simulation game. By choosing the questionnaire, I combined qualitative methods (case-studies and interviews) with quantitative methods (questionnaire) to first zoom in and gain an in-depth understanding of the topic, and then to zoom out and broaden the perspective. Discussions in larger groups have the risk that some respondents take the lead while others remain quiet. Furthermore, people tend to agree with a general opinion in social interactions. In contrast, a questionnaire allowed the necessary anonymity to obtain honest opinions. This proved to add rich data, improved validity, and prevented generalization of the results. Nonetheless, an expert panel with a focus group could have been a valuable method in addition to the questionnaire to stimulate interesting discussions for deeper insights. This was not feasible due to time restrictions of this thesis.

Research results

The external validity or transferability determines “the degree to which a study can be generalized across social settings” (Bryman, 2016). The transferability of qualitative research results is naturally limited as every project is unique.

The extended risk register and the success factor register are based on two case studies and are therefore primarily transferable to cases that have similar characteristics to Binckhorst or Strijp-S. Furthermore, both cases are not completed yet which means that some factors are only *expected* but not proven to have an impact. However, external validity was increased by employing a large sample by means of a questionnaire with responses of 9 + 67 experts. Moreover, 'thick description' was produced which provides a profound database to judge about the transferability of each individual risk and success factor to other situations. In this regard, the obtained overview serves as a valuable starting point for any case that, however, needs to be adapted accordingly. The general validity could have been improved by conducting more interviews and case studies with different characteristics, to cover a broader spectrum of situations.

The RSFM Framework has a high degree of transferability, as it was designed to be adaptable and applicable to any case, since it serves as a guide not as a fixed step-by-step strategy. However, the framework has not been tested in practise. Nonetheless, this new insight improves traditional risk management and helps to design effective strategies to cope with risks and to achieve success. Although it was designed for urban area transformations, the framework can be used for other situations due to its adaptability such as urban and rural (re-)developments, green-field developments or other large-scale developments that are characterized by high complexity. For small-scale development projects a traditional risk management approach can be sufficient.

The general validity of developers and policy recommendations are high, since they were validated by both qualitative and quantitative methods. The specific advice for Binckhorst has a limited external validity as this was solely based on Strijp-S. Thus, these advices must be taken with caution.

Despite those limitations, the results increased knowledge about area transformations which helps to reduce uncertainty. Particularly the analysis of risks and success factors helps to better understand their interconnection, which has not yet been analysed in previous research. Since this knowledge can make a crucial difference for the success of a project, this thesis adds to existing knowledge.

Ethical issues

A moral problem was encountered when discussing about risks and issues with different actors during interviews. Since naturally actors have different perspectives, sometimes they blamed others for certain problems or asked me about information from other people. I had to be sensitive to respect the value of privacy and to maintain confidentiality of statements made. On the one side, my active and professional responsibility obliged me not to pass on confidential information to other people, considering the likely consequences of creating discord amongst parties. This is in line with the ethics of deontology that would determine this action wrong as it does not agree with moral rules. On the other side, passing on information about problems could help to solve them, by communicating those different opinions and creating mutual understanding. According to the doctrine of consequentialism, the end result would justify the means and could lead to the greater happiness. In the light of these considerations I decided to adhere to the norms and not to discuss confidential information. Instead, I offered all interview partners to send them the end results of my research which can provide them with new insight from different parties. Particularly the advice given for actors working in the Binckhorst development can be valuable information. In this way confidentiality is maintained since interviewees are kept anonymous, but it still helps to solve issues and to reduce risks in practise due to an increase of knowledge.

Personal reflection

During this research I realised that the issue of structural vacancy and the process of area transformation is much more complex than I expected. Although this research answered the defined questions, yet much more questions arose. I hope to get the opportunity in my future career to dive deeper in the topic of risk management since this is such a complex yet crucial aspect of any project. Above content related aspects, I acquired valuable personal skills. I trained myself to work most efficiently with limited means and a given timeframe, and to be the manager of my own work. I learned that it is crucial to build up a network of experts, mentors and colleagues who can provide you with the right information and personal support if needed. Furthermore, through the contacts with experts during this research I got interesting insight about potential future positions for myself.