ARCHITECTURAL BRANDING

Reflection | Liza Hidding 2016

Liza Hidding | 4077601

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Delft University of Technology

Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment

Master Thesis, Explorelab 22

Prof. dr. H.J. Hultink (research)

ir. L.M.M de Wit (design)

ir. H.L. van der Meel (technology)

The relationship between the theme of the studio and the subject/case study

I am highly interested in business models and branding strategies. Therefore, I take part in the Entrepreneurship Annotation and followed several business and branding related courses. Driven by an interest and curiosity in the combination between architecture and branding strategies, I joined the Explore Lab 22 studio, which gave me the opportunity to formulate my own project about both fascinations and resulted in the topic of this project:

'Architectural Branding' - *The Improvement of Architectural Brand Communication*

Explorelab is a studio with a lot of freedom in the development of the project. This was great at the start because finding a fascination was not that hard, but this freedom also came with hard times to find focus within the topic of retail architecture, because designing for a brand comes with many parameters.

The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the studio and the method chosen

My approach in my research and design was to make all choices based on the identity of the brand. And that is why I selected the brand at first, to be able to strategically select a project location and a purpose for the building.

The brand I selected is Airbnb, because I preferred to select a brand with a well-known and strong brand identity, but lack of a consistent and unique architectural identity. Also a brand that can benefit from new value propositions and a physical channel. Designing for this online service brand gave me a lot of design freedom, because there are little physical associations with the brand. In the end I wanted to show an example of how a new architectural design language for this brand can be implemented in an existing building and in a new building.

In my case my fascination is bridging the faculty of Industrial design and Architecture and therefore the approach I had during the research was influenced by methods that are often used in branding and product design related studies.

A lot of freedom within this studio was also challenging. Because anything is possible, it was sometimes hard to make decisions. I had a lot of moments of doubt, especially during the research. That is why I spend a lot of time on the research, and this has shorten the time that I could spend on the design. I learned that I have to make decisions more quick, and forced myself to do this in the short time I had for the development of the design. Fortunately, my research helped me a lot to speed up my design process, because it provided a lot of essential attributes.

The relationship between research and design
During the first half year of my graduation project, I focused on researching the topic: Architectural Branding. Figure 1 illustrates the four different parts in my research.

A literature review was done to collect background information on the topic and find a relevant point of focus. This knowledge resulted in a problem statement and related research questions. The next step was to gain a deeper understanding of branding. The basic principles were extracted from literature findings, and interviews with several branding experts in the Netherlands helped me to understand how brand related parameters influence each other, and verified the importance of architecture as brand touchpoint. I think that talking to experts saved a lot of time in learning about branding, because I was new in the topic. All relevant branding knowledge for my project is summarized in Chapter 2 and resulted in a research and design approach based on brand personality characteristics.
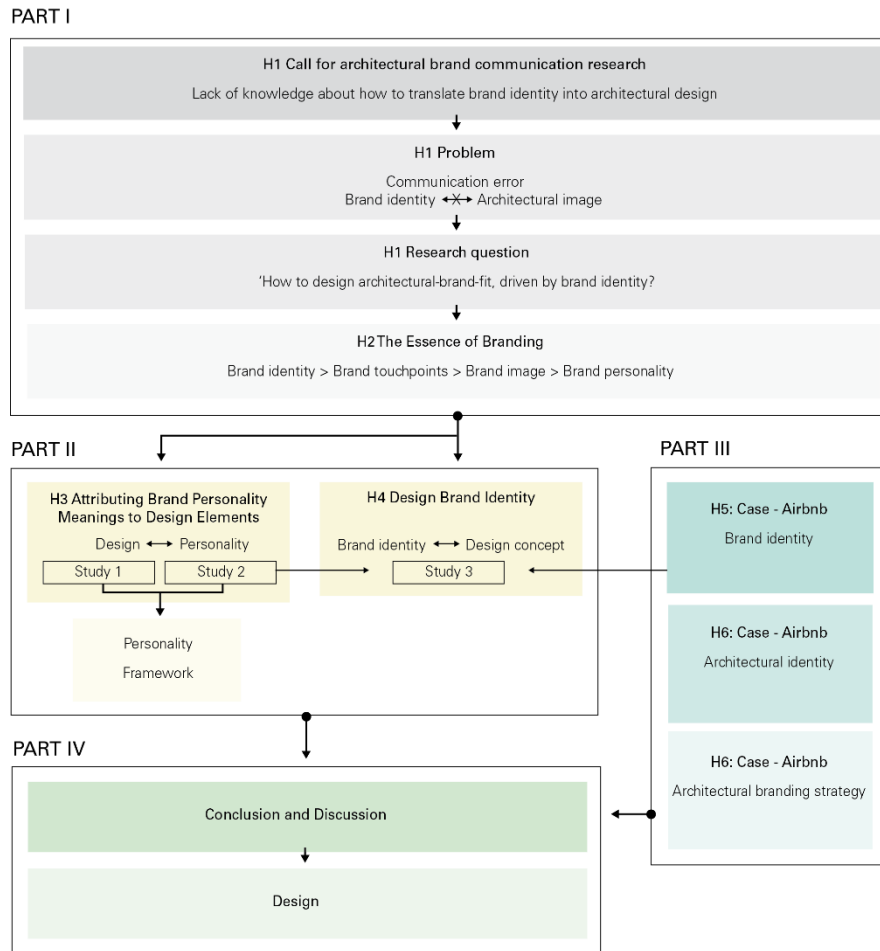
Figure 1: Overview of the research and relationship with the design

The second part of the research is designed to provide support in the design process. I designed two studies that addressed the first sub question. Study 1 exists of expert interviews on personality impressions and associations regarding a 3D scale model. This was a good starting assignment for me, because I could already start designing in a physical way. In Study 2 participants were asked to think up and relate different design attributes to a given personality. Results of both studies were processed in a personality framework. This framework provides the personality meaning of compositions, shapes and materials, and I used it to analyse the personality impression of different buildings designed for the brand Airbnb in Part III. Also the framework is used during the design process. First a set of desired personality impressions were determined (Part III). Then attribute qualities suggested by the framework were considered and implemented in the design.

Then the focus shifted from the meaning of design elements to the development of a design concept. Study 3, a generative prototyping study, explored how participants integrate different elements in order to communicate brand unique associations and provides an answer on the second sub question. From this study important steps (see, figure 2) for the development of a design concept are extracted:

Figure 2: Development of a design concept driven by brand identity

It was interesting to see how other students were dealing with my own problem. And it helped me a lot in evaluating which steps were most important in the process. I used these steps in the design process as qualities to achieve and programme requirements. All steppingstones could be filled in by the results of the brand analysis or attribute selection according the personality framework and were tested and evaluated during the design process.

The things I selected for my design:

Brand unique associations – 'Community feeling', 'Interaction between hosts and guests', 'Unique city experience', 'Building trust', 'Hosting', 'Travelling', 'Explore'

Brand personality – Personalities to express: 'Traditional', 'Friendly', 'Cheerful', 'Explore'

Story – 'The City Lounge, *hang out with locals and travellers to empower their engagement*

'Travel guidance, *starting point for unique travel experiences'*

Attributes – Suggestions of attribute qualities regarding the above-mentioned personalities are provided by the personality framework, and represented in the design. Some examples :

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'Traditional'	*Specific cultural building qualities > Groothandelsgebouw*
'Friendly'	*Centred, Wood, Concrete, Introvert, felt, soft furniture > Core interior, Lounge*
'Explore'	*Dynamic, Layered, Semi-transparent, Smart, Geometric > Façade, Stairs, Displays*
'Cheerful'	*Dynamic, Lively,* Perforated, Colored, Ductile, Modified > Façade, Stairs, Displays

Purpose – The building has three main purposes: Interaction between locals and travellers, Events, Sales/Service.

Programme - Multifunctional auditorium, Lounge area, Product display, Small kitchen, Drinks bar, interactive map for city exploration, Service desk

Choice of location –According the research, it is recommended for sales/service and event spaces to be situated at a high traffic location. I considered Amsterdam and Rotterdam being most suitable for a pilot case for Airbnb. Because Amsterdam is coping with tourist problems, it was a strategic choice in favour of the Netherlands to select Rotterdam as Cultural Capital, to hopefully decrease the tourist problem in Amsterdam and attract them to Rotterdam. The following criteria coming from the brand analysis helped me to select the design location:

Station square: *High traffic and starting point for travellers*
Building: *Groothandelsgebouw = Representation of reconstruction Maaskant as important local architect*
Building part: Foyer, *Kriterion cinema unique of its situation on the roof, and unique of its window which gives an overview on the city*

Main design concept: 'The City Lounge'. A central friendly lounge where the brand welcomes locals and travellers to interact with each other and strengthen the community feeling. When entering the outer ring the focus shifts towards the city or explore what the brand has to offer. Therefore the façade provides the function of displaying content, products or a city view. The window frames provide multifunctional use and is based on ISO format sizes to place panels, shelfs, posters, products, or digital content. The building is modular and easy to adapt to meet cultural preferences. Façade covering panels can transform the aesthetic appearance, but the basic elements, shapes and overall composition will remain the same, to maintain brand recognition.
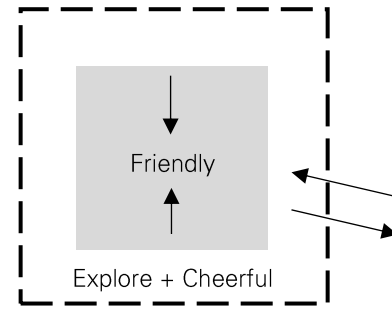
To conclude, the research provides a method to develop a design concept that captures the identity of the Airbnb brand in architectural design attributes. The research is used as guidance to select which aspects of the brand is desired to communicate and the framework suggested the right elements according their personality meaning.

The meaning of attributes was focused on single elements, whereas a space is always evaluated by overall appearance. More research into combining different attributes would have provide more guidance in the elaboration phase of the total design. Also the research lacks in knowledge about furniture pieces. Furniture plays an important role in creating brand recognition, and therefore designing them as being part of the architectural design would have provide more control and consistency in the design language.

I am also aware that the recognition for the Airbnb brand and the communicative power of my design can only be proven when multiple variations are designed within a different context. It takes time and repetition before the design language becomes recognizable.

The relationship between the project and the wider social context

An holistic architectural approach in retail design is a hot topic, because due to online shopping the role of the physical store is changing towards important communication channel for a brand. However, it is not yet well understood how the brand identity can be translated to a physical manifestation.

The retail industry is now in demand for architects who can work with the complexity of all parameters that are influencing consumers behaviour. These parameters include: Branding, Architecture, Signing, Digital content, Marketing, Product design, and Service design.

I hope my project can be an example for students that share my fascination, and that our faculty can maybe even introduce a new master programme for retail and hospitality design. Especially because this task demands for broad expertise. When we combine business, branding and design, we can built great brand identities and come up with new store and business concepts for our future retail landscape.