CRAFT & ARCHITECTURE
the redefinition and relevance of craft in contemporary production

P4 Project Reflection
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December 2016
Craft & Architecture:  
The Redefinition and Relevance of Craft in Contemporary Production

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Masters of Science in Architecture Graduation Thesis

Delft University of Technology  
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MSc Track: Architecture || Studio: Explore Lab

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December 2016
Reflection Aspect: Lab Methodology vs. Student Methodology

The nature of the Explore Lab studio is wonderful. Students who have a particular interest, or 'fascination', that isn't addressed by any of the other studios get a chance to work with their fascination at Explore Lab. Anything is possible, as long as it fits within the the general framework of graduation requirements from TU Delft. This is an amazing opportunity for anyone looking to get the most out of their education, myself among them. The Explore Lab studio provides the freedom to explore. Research and design topics are of your own choosing, with mentorship from tutors of your own choosing. In the past, some of the most creative and influential projects have come out of Explore Lab.

In turn, it is expected that the Explore Lab student define his or her own research and design project. This means setting your own personal boundaries, goals, products, deadlines, and standards. It also means that the research part of the thesis project is expected to be more extensive than other studios. There isn't a single given method of research done by students in Explore Lab. Many do literature studies, some do interviews and field research, others do case studies. All research projects have to be able to stand alone - meaning they have to be applicable to more than just the design project attached to it. A noble purpose, trying to contribute something more to the world of architecture.

In my experience there is also a darker side to Explore Lab. Defining my own research and design project proved challenging, though fun and exciting. Sticking to project boundaries that I had set out, however, was much more difficult than I anticipated. It is so easy to get lost in research, to be aware of where it is going and where it stops. I spent many weeks reading texts that eventually didn't end up anywhere in my thesis, because hey, they were so interesting! I would often lose sight of where the thesis was headed and why I decided to write on craftsmanship in the first place. It became something that it seemed I would never finish, a dark cloud hanging over me instead of the exciting project I set out to do a year ago. A large part of this is due to my personality; I find it difficult to work alone for such an extended period of time, without clear goals and deadlines. I let my thesis become a mountain so large that just the thought of climbing it filled me with dread. This all sounds very dramatic and I'll probably look back and laugh at this later (right???).

What helped a lot was that many other Explorelabbers felt the same way - we found a lot of solace in each other. If there is anything I could tell the next generation of Explorelabbers, it would be to make contact with each other: work (or just sit) in the studio space, talk to each other, share woes and fears and success and failure. It helps!

In the end, the lab methodology was set out quite clearly at the beginning of the graduation process: “Explorelab is defined as a
Research-driven graduation laboratory for exploring fascinations in the built environment professions.” (Explore Lab Handbook 2015, pg 1)

This is exactly what it was. The research portion of my graduation project has definitely been dominant so far, fitting in well with the Explore Lab process. My research was mostly done through literature study, with a few case studies to exemplify the hypothesis. The downside to the Explore Lab methodology is that it is so individually driven. I personally have found it hard to bring the research to an appropriate end and to move on to the design portion,

Reflection Aspect: Project and Social Context

My research “Craftsmanship and Architecture, a study in the revitalization and relevance of craft in a post-modern society” came out of a fascination that I’ve been developing for quite a few years, admittedly mostly without realizing it. I have a previous degree in Art History, for no other reason than that art, beauty, and philosophy excite me. It is tempting to classify these things as products of luxury; spoiled (Western) ways to find some meaning in a life where the basic needs have been met. Look a little closer, however, and it becomes clear that at even the earliest beginnings of humanity there is evidence to suggest that we wanted to make our environments more than just the bare minimum. To make it more beautiful, more meaningful. Functionality alone has never been enough.

It is sometimes difficult for me to justify why I’m spending all my time and energy on trivial subjects like craftsmanship and beer brewing, when I could also be designing shelters for refugees or thinking of sustainable housing solutions for earthquake regions. Those things are necessary and noble pursuits (serious props to my colleagues working on those projects!). I now realize that I don’t need to justify it. I simply want to make the world a more beautiful place and I’m going to do so in a way that I know how, within my social context.

A lot of the problems that I see in the built environment (and our culture in general) have to do with indifference and fear. Indifference to the future in favor of immediate results and fear of doing something unique or out of the ordinary. Luckily, there is also a growing ‘trend’ towards products that possess neither indifference nor fear. Homemade bread, personalized jewelry, locally grown produce, craft beer, tailored clothing, etc etc. These products may seem trivial at first glance, but they are the symbol of a growing ethos: attention, care, and thoroughness make for better and longer-lasting products. These products often create a connection. Personal connections, between people, objects, buildings - is what makes us treasure our environment and makes us want to preserve it. In Richard Sennett’s 2008 work The Craftsman, he moves away from the traditional idea of a craftsman as a bearded blacksmith with a blackened apron and argues the notion that a craftsman is anyone who does
their work with pride and thoroughness, ranging from a nurse to a computer programmer. Craftsmanship, thus, is a philosophy that seeks to improve the way we produce and connect to the material world around us. In the context of architecture: craft architecture produces a built environment that creates a meaningful connection to the people that use it, making it able to be used, loved, modified, and re-used over and over again.