P4 Reflection
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1. Introduction

For this graduation project I have been working on the design for a locally embedded dementia care home, which forms the ‘core’ of the project. Hereby the main focus has been to show the possibilities of improving the living environment of severely demented elderly in order to increase their well being, compared to spatial and social situations that are often recurrent within the existing traditional elderly care- and nursery homes. Several themes were explored when focusing on this improvement; such as the inclusion of extensive gardens and green spaces, the combination of a care program for severely demented people and other (public) programmatic functions, and the use of small-scale living homes for the ones suffering from dementia.

The design location is situated in the southern part of Amsterdam, on the former Havenstraat terrain. This specific plot is surrounded by different spatial and social conditions, as it forms the junction between different residential neighborhoods (the Schinkelbuurt and Plan-Zuid by Berlage) and a former industrial area. On this plot a former prison building, Het Huis van Bewaring II, is situated. Through many years this built structure has given place to multiple types of functional program, including artists’ residences, and currently functions as a refugee shelter. Within this specific graduation project the re-use of this former prison building is of great importance, as it problematizes the relation between a given site, an existing built structure and a specific functional program, the dementia care home.

In the following reflection report I will take a closer look at the research that I have done and the results to which this has led. I will discuss the graduation project in terms of product, process, and planning. The aim of this reflection is to deepen my understanding of the design approach, how and where it was effective, what and why I could have done it in another way. The reflection is divided into four aspects as guided by the Graduation Manual 2015-2016;

1. The relation between the project and the wider social context
2. The relation between the theme of the graduation lab and the chosen subject
3. The relation between the methodological line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student
4. The relation between research and design

The relation between the project and the wider social context

Through recent years many changes have taken place within the organization of healthcare in the Netherlands. As the provision of healthcare formerly used to comprise care and residence in one package, the development of ‘unplanned care’ has lead to the possibility of separating the provision of care and residence. Traditionally elderly would go through different ‘stages’ of receiving care, which would consecutively take place within the personal home, the traditional care home, and eventually the traditional nursery home. However, nowadays care clients can receive either place within an environment that offers permanent healthcare (the traditional nursery home for people that are in bad enough physical and/or mental conditions), or they can receive care at home. Therefore, the model of the traditional care home is disappearing and a large amount of elderly living at home,
including the ones suffering from dementia, is mostly dependent on themselves, volunteers and their personal social network. However, this social network is not always present and a place in a nursery home can be provided merely once the physical and mental condition gets bad enough, which forces people to extend the duration of living at home ‘independently’.

Multiple beneficial aspects, including the provision of different degrees of care, the mix of more healthy people and less healthy people, and the stimulation of social interaction and –cohesion, originally characterized the traditional care homes. The disappearance of this type of care organization often leads to social isolation and a lack of social interaction among elderly in need of care. As a response to this development, the trend of extending the duration of elderly living at home is supported with the development of small-scale care organizations. These organizations often consist of facilities deeply embedded into a neighborhood. Among these there are group homes that are spatially connected to be able to provide efficient care during day- as well as nighttime. With the development of these facilities elderly can still participate as much as possible within society and simultaneously receive the amount of care that they need, which is beneficial to the elderly themselves as well as caretakers.

Furthermore, the traditional nursery homes that are often impersonal, large, institutional buildings that function independently from their surroundings are no longer regarded as acceptable. As unsustainable objects situated on the outskirts of cities, lacking any sort of interaction with their surroundings, this type of care facilities becomes more and more outdated and does not appear capable of responding to the demand for care within the current societal conditions.

A substantial part of this graduation project deals not merely with the topic of dementia, but also with the topic of the general organization of healthcare and its recent developments through time. Therefore, the topic of care facilities embedded within cities is of great importance. This project responds to this discussion by giving place to multiple spatial organizations of care facilities, varying in the amount of care that is provided. Firstly, it includes group homes for elderly suffering from severe dementia in which they can receive permanent care (24/7). Secondly, it includes service flats for elderly in which they can receive the amount of care that they need. Furthermore, the topics of social isolation and lack of social interaction are taken into account by extending the functional program of the project further, in order to include more social groups that could be combined with the residence and care of severely demented elderly. Other programmatic functions included are; a day care center for people suffering from dementia that live independently, a kindergarten, a publicly accessible restaurant, a student hotel, office spaces and flexible workshop spaces, an event space, and multiple shops and a cafe. These added functions allow for a deeply embedded complex within the city.

The relation between the theme of the graduation lab and the chosen subject

The main objective from the studio was to design a non-hospitalized health care facility. There were two main focus points as directed by the studio; the relation between the interior and the exterior, on both urban and building level and the role that gardens could fulfill regarding the well-being of people in need of care. As the topic of dementia care was suggested, this immediately appealed to me, especially regarding the current developments of the Dutch healthcare system that were formerly illustrated.

As I had determined for myself already during the first stages of the graduation project that the embedment within a specific place of the dementia care facility should be essential for my design, I decided to include a series of other programmatic functions as formerly mentioned. In this regard also, I have chosen the location in the southern part of Amsterdam, as it is a specific junction in the city where multiple spatial as well as social conditions occur. This allowed me to design a care facility that is situated in the middle of society. Another important reason for choosing this location was the presence of the currently vacant former prison building – Huis van Bewaring II. The specific plot on which this building is situated is largely fragmented, which together with this notion of vacancy allows further development. Through time the former prison building has given
place to different programmatic functions, including residences for artists and a refugee center, and its current vacancy appealed to me even more, as it allows developing a new assignment for it. The design of a new building on this plot challenges to come up with ideas to deal with the existing built structures, and at the same time create something new. Hereby, the existing built structure of the prison is especially challenging, due to associations relating to its former use.

With my choice for this specific location however, the presence of the currently vacant former prison building became another substantial aspect of my graduation project. Rather than designing a dementia care facility combined with other programmatic functions, the exercise for this project has been turned into the question of how to deal with the existing built structure that has a dominant presence in its exterior expression and in its associations that relate to its former use, and how to create a safe and comfortable care- and living environment in which the former prison building can offer valuable qualities to the overall design.

Within the studio we were encouraged to research into gardens and the use of the traditional 'hofje' typology as the ideal form for small-scale care facilities. The garden was addressed at the very beginning, however a bit forgotten during the further development of my project. However, another evident question with my choice for the location was how the typology of the courtyard could offer qualities to the overall design and how it could be conceived through the use of the former prison building. Afterwards I can state that the typology of the courtyard in general is a very significant part of the project as it organizes the overall assemblage of program and is the relation between the already existing and newly added structures. At this moment I can clearly state that the design of the gardens themselves lack depth, which is quite contradictory to the subject choice of the studio where the gardens are described as something essential to the well-being of the dementia patient. However, I do not think that this is limiting when describing my design and the considerations I have had during the process to deal with all these different questions. It is quite disappointing that the project does not reach the level of elaboration in which the gardens can also be displayed in full detail, but I feel that the typology of the courtyard is a significant part of my design and has helped me to develop an idea to deal with the existing structure as well as to embed the building into its surroundings.

My initial idea of designing a care- and living environment for people suffering from severe dementia, from the beginning has had a large influence on my approach toward the location, the former prison building, and the organization of all programmatic parts of the project. Whereas the programmatic part of the dementia care facility demands a certain level of enclosure and protection, the idea of giving place to a complex assemblage of programmatic functions was to some extent troubling in the beginning of the process, especially regarding the existing building. Hereby the topic of social interaction has been a significant starting point, as it allowed me to decide how to arrange the program on this specific location and to some extent to develop an idea of the re-use of the prison building.

I think that my intention to create a safe and enclosed care- and living environment within the city and to create different relations with the city has been successfully elaborated. However, a clear way of dealing with the former prison building and having a clear attitude towards its presence has been something I have been struggling throughout the process, and is something I could probably struggle with for another year. Even though I think the approach I have followed towards the existing buildings and the creation of a safe and comfortable care- and living environment, and its concurrent execution is justifiable, I am convinced that there is no 'best' solution to dealing with these questions.

The relation between the methodological line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student

The studio was organized in such a way that we started out by doing several weeks of group work. With this we firstly focused on a garden design, followed by the research into 'hofjes' and finally by choosing a specific location for our own designs. As we were all free to choose the user group and location this has given us a lot of freedom after working in groups.
The overall approach of the studio is focused on designing through the use of big scale models and sketches, which I felt quite comfortable with during the entire process. This was not something that was evident for me from the beginning, since I have had no experience with the Interiors chair before. This graduation studio was something that appealed to me since my former projects were never elaborated to a certain detailed level, and I conceived this as a nice opportunity to delve into this way of working at least once before graduating. The aspect of shifting between different scales and simultaneously designing at different scales was something I found hard, but also very helpful. The methods and techniques in the studio are separated into theory and practice, even though I sometimes missed a bit of theoretical background. My visit to three different healthcare institutions were very interesting to get to know the user-group even more, which I also think has been very beneficial to my project.

What I have been struggling a large part of this graduation process so far, is being confronted with the friction between personal ideas and others’ opinions. While working on this project my attitude towards the project as well as towards other students and my mentors has been varying over time. I have realized quite late in the process that it is most important to fully support your own ideas and to be confident in what you have worked on. Sometimes I have felt that I lacked experience concerning references compared to fellow students, however I have gained a lot from working together with the group, about which I can also state this has helped me during the entire process.

**The relation between research and design**

During the beginning of the process the research of our studio has taken place alongside the design process. By choosing specific topics for the research it was easier for me to find a clear approach toward the actual design. While doing research I have experienced it as quite troublesome to directly implement this into my design. As I always have a bit of trouble by translating conclusions of theoretical and social research into the elaboration of a design project concerning concrete architectural solutions and tools, this was something I experienced with this project as well.

With my first attempt during the P4 presentations it was quite evident that the project still lacked a feasible translation of the theoretical and social research into a livable programmatic approach, addressing the topic of dementia care. This programmatic part of the project was barely illustrated and not thought through concerning practical ideas about this type of care. Key issues included; what does the living environment of the demented elderly look like, where and how does the dementia care home find connections with the outer world and the surrounding environment, and how do you soften the exterior and interior expression and character of the former prison building. The possibility to present the project with a second attempt for a P4 presentation has allowed me to work on these specific questions and to make the project more specific.

Before, I felt that the research within this graduation process and studio has been very limited, and that a certain theoretical background was missing. However, when I reflect upon this now I realize that a clear view on the user-group is most essential to design a specific care- and living environment that gives place to all practical issues that are involved with the program.