REFLECTION

Living in Retail
Colophon

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**Motive**

In many Dutch inner cities vacancy is currently large. It is expected that retail space in urban areas will shrink significantly in the next years (Smit, 2013). A total of two million square metres shall vanish, according to an analysis of consultancy Booz & Company. The decline means that 17 per cent of the total retail space disappears. Locatus, a market leader in terms of retail details in the Benelux, expect for the coming years that the vacancy rate in the Dutch retail will reach up to 9 to 10 per cent (Nederlandse Publieke Omroep, 2013). In April 2013, 6.5 per cent of 220,000 stores is empty. “Until 2020, about 7,000 stores will be added to the vacancy”, said Gert-Jan Slob of Locatus.

**Relationship between the theme of the studio and the subject, location and object**

Explore Lab is an exceptional thesis laboratory for students with a unique fascination which cannot be explored in any of the ‘regular’ thesis labs. This opportunity is only for highly motivated students with an obsessive interest in a specific question and an exceptional ability to lead themselves and others in theoretical and design research. Explorelab does thus not offer subjects, but just room to start your own. The subject ‘transforming vacant retail to living’ has previously not been investigated and would not have fit within another graduation studio.

**Relationship between the project and the broader social context**

This report is written in order to complete the Master track Architecture of Delft University of Technology. Its scientific relevance is in developing theories, concepts and knowledge to improve our understanding of the retail market, in particular the possibilities for transformation of retail properties. Its social relevance comes from the contribution to develop knowledge and tools for transformation in order to minimize the decrease in urban quality in inner cities. Both the scientific as well as the social relevance are outlined below.

**Scientific Relevance**

In the academic field some literature has been published concerning vacant retail and many general advices are discussed. But a detailed report, based on the possibilities for transformation of existing retail for the purpose of mini-
mizing the decrease in urban quality in existing shopping streets in Dutch historical inner cities, is still missing in literature. An effort is made to provide more insight on this subject. It is an attempt to fill the previously mentioned gap between the vacancy and urban quality. Several types of research are combined with each other: literature review (retail), interviews, using data from the Funda retail database (physical factors) and own observations (case studies).

Social Relevance
Within this research, different locations are included, elaborated in a total of nine Dutch historical inner cities. These cities are used to gain more insight in the current retail market. The graduation project is also relevant to society for lots of parties, from the retailers to the municipality. They gain more insight into determining factors of existing retail and what actions could be made to attack vacancy in retail in Dutch inner cities. Because of this information they can easier take action. The research is also relevant for retailers and developers of retail in general, so they can get a clearer picture of the various factors that affect the quality of life in shopping streets.

Research
In order to collect data about retail in the Netherlands, cities are selected for the use as a sample and representation for the Netherlands. To be able to select these cities, selection criteria are composed. Aim of the city samples is to get insight in the current retail. All the cities are selected on the basis of multiple terms and conditions.

Before all categories are grouped, general results are processed. Hereby, every aspect which is discussed in the chapter Categorizing Aspects, is drawn. Results range from the number of shops with only a single floor level to the number of shops who have a side entrance. Striking results are highlighted.
**Categorizing aspects**

First of all, the retail has to be categorized. For this, several aspects are used in order to see what possibilities are present within that retail property. These distinctive aspects are:

- Surroundings
- Upper floors
- Storefront
- Floor area
- Width
- Depth
- Height
- Entrance
- Inner garden
- Rooflight
- Floor levels
- Facilities

The investigation revealed that retail properties are difficult to classify in categories, because there are so many different aspects involved. That is why I have chosen to remove the categories in the research so that the different aspects come forward more. Through these aspects one can quickly gain clarity about the characteristics of his or her building and the possibilities for transformation.

**Financial feasibility**

Transforming retail into living means a change in several financial aspects. First of all, some literature is summarized. Secondly, an calculation example is made for the transformation of two retail stores into two apartments. I have included this information in my research because it can be of great importance for the transformation of an existing store.

**Transformation restrictions**

A retail property cannot be transformed in every situation. Several limitations are defined, such as the zoning plan as well as the protected city scape.
**Case studies**

Several case studies are done to obtain more information about existing transformed retail into living properties. I have found that often the same solutions are used: merging the property in one house; creating a split-level; changing to whole front facade; including an inner garden; making an entrance hall behind the facade; using window film on the shop front; placing objects in front and behind the facade. Through the case studies I have been able to acquire the ways of how a store can be reused and how inhabitants try to get more privacy into their home. In addition, I can use the case studies to show what is in my opinion wrong. The case studies have thus been a good addition to the whole project.

**Design**

The sub question “What steps has to be taken in order to transform retail into living” is answered by the several designs. With a total of 10 designs for 10 different retail properties in different cities, I tried to create generic solutions. There are lots of possibilities of transformation of retail into living, but all possibilities can be divided into two main groups; the temporary solution and permanent. When a store is vacant for some time and the owner wants to look at the option of transformation, the location of the store has to be conducted because this virtually determines the solution. It is also of great importance what kind of store it is. Aspects about the width of the front, the entrance, the access to the upper floors, the amount of daylight, etc., are all aspects which tell something about the possibilities for transformation.
transition space

implementation of the temporary - first floor

implementation of the temporary - section
The picture above shows the concept of living in a retail property. Here the idea of a transitional space between the shopping street and the living space clearly comes forward. With this concept, I tried to show that it is important to distinguish between the public and the private space in order to create an enjoyable living environment. The transition space contributes both to the shopping street as to the living environment inside. It will be taken as a showcase of the house, so that the storefront is still regarded as a storefront and the resident can store his or her required equipment for use in the outdoor space. The permeable wall in between the transition space and living space allows daylight to enter the inside.

In this diagram I also want to make clear that the servant space, also part of the design, functions as a separation element between the living spaces and the sleeping space. Within this servant space, facilities as a toilet and/or shower can be implemented. Also storage can be present.

The temporary solution offers opportunities for properties that are likely return to its former position of a store in the future. This temporary solution consists of an implementation of a unit with all necessary facilities for that specific store. For connecting the pipework etc., no additional conversions are needed within the property, these will be flexibly connected to the existing system. The unit is adaptable by store and by the owner’s needs. It consists of parts which can easily be put into each other and be reassembled again.

The permanent possibilities are more about changing the basics of the property to create more possibilities and to raise the value of the property, for example lowering the basement floor, creating an inner garden, changing the façade, etc.

To show off the way of designing in this reflection one example is used, both for the temporary and more permanent design. The temporary system is placed in the rear part of the space, because it can be seen as the darkest corner of the store. In addition, it also has to be close to the sewage and air shaft. In this situation the sewage runs right along the wall and ends at the location of the system, the air shaft is located behind the separation wall. It is not necessary to add a toilet, because it is already located in a fairly location in the store. By means of a partition wall the transition space is created. This creates space for the bike, putting away the jacket and other supplies for outdoor. This will also create more privacy within the home.
changing the basics - basement

changing the basics - first floor

changing the basics - section
The main parts of the project:

During the project, several decisions and strategies are used. Below they are highlighted with a brief explanation.

1. Selecting a diverse portfolio of retail properties throughout the Netherlands to create a broad view of the vacant retail stock available.
   An important step in the whole process has been the researching of stores in different areas in the Netherlands. These cities were selected on the basis of diversity, size and vacancy rates. Through this selection a total of 9 cities is created and obtained a diverse picture of the empty shops in the Netherlands.

2. Utilizing the opportunity of designing numerous case studies to derive universal strategies that can be employed across all vacant retail properties. In addition, during the process, the decision is made to make more than one design. As a result, same as the cities, give a broader picture of the possibilities for transformating of existing stores to housing, both temporary and permanent. In total there are 10 properties taken care of, including temporary and permanent. This amount of design, I had the opportunity to generate more information for the research. These designs can very well contribute to the manual by adding them as design examples.

3. Establishing a mediating temporary system that allows clients to firstly have the economic opportunity to establish what their idea of home is, without committing to a final layout. Secondly, through this flexible system it allows the property to be returned to its former retail function with minimum effort.
   Through the research, I found that the location of the property reflects the possibilities. The location of the property is in fact important because it says something about hte impermanence of the new residential function. By making this choice, I have delved further into workarounds. I have investigated existing systems and tried to solve the problems these systems have, such as making the system more flexible so that it can be fitted in several ways within an existing situation. Through this temporary function I had to trigger myself more to think about the essentials, such as required facilities and privacy.

4. Identifying the main issues that occurred between important thresholds and designing them in such a way that would create a pleasant living environment within the inner city.
   During the project it showed that the threshold between shopping and housing is an important aspect in all of my design tasks. This threshold is not restricted of making an extra space in between. By adjusting the current, such as creating a void or raising the ground floor, there is a visual boundary created between street and home, between public and private. This statement is important because in the
case studies done in the research it shows that people do not know how they can generate more privacy, and thus close the curtains. By making a window space for the home, the storefront maintains its function, a transitional space between public and private is created, and also storage space is added for the outside materials.

**Manual**

The manual provides a complete overview of the entire project. The manual can also be seen as an end product of my graduation. This forms the basis for transforming vacant retail into housing. In the manual I have tried to be as clear as possible by showing pictogramms and text explanations so that it will be readable for each target group. All the 10, or actually 20 designs, are used as a case study in the manual so one can get an idea what strategies should be used. Of course every situation and property need an individual scan but the manual can be used as a beginning to the market, transforming vacant retail into living.

**Relationship between research and design**

I started the project with the question “What are the possibilities for transformation of existing retail into living in order to minimize the decline in urban quality in Dutch historical inner cities?” The research was initially intended to create a design task and that it was completed before the main steps of the design were made, but my research has never come down at all, until now. In retrospect, it appears that the research has contributed to the design as well as it has been changed after designing. This shows that, because of the many different designs that are created during this project even more input could be given to the research. The relationship between research and design are clearly evident in the manual Living in Retail. Here, all designs are cited as practical examples of potential solutions for transformation. The study is clearly shown in the entire manual. The research is in the manual not be seen as a separate part, it belongs to he whole project.

**Answer on the research question**

Throughout the project, I tried to give an answer to the research question `What are the possibilities for transformation of existing retail into living in order to minimize the decline in urban quality in Dutch historical inner cities?`. By keeping the project wide both in research (involving nine different cities throughout the Netherlands) and design (making more than one design) I have managed to create a manual in which an attempt is made to give a start to the problem of vacant retail in inner cities. In this manual all options and features are listed. In addition, the quality of the urban street will increase by the transition space between the street and the living space. Thus, the street retains the character of a shopping street, but still here and there filled with another function. Of course, a home in a shopping street will have some effect, but better a filled shop with a house than an empty one.
Reflection
The relation between the design and the research pleases me, because in my opinion the research was a good starting point for designing solutions. All categories could be used in order to create some cases and to sketch possibilities. The case studies that have been done for the purpose of obtaining more information about the possibilities of transformation from retail to living gave me more insight into what possibilities there already are. These possibilities could be used for implementation in the design cases.

One important decision of my design process that was crucial is the choice to make more than one design, so that I have multiple sites and several existing buildings. Personally it took some time to get used to the small and the number of design projects. Because of this I had the opportunity to design several projects at once and bring ideas from one to another. This has also often brought doubts whether the design project would meet the usual graduation requirements. However, this research has made me reconsider the role that the Architect plays in relation to the client. In considering the problem of numerous clients it has required me to strip it back to the essentials. Establishing clear strategies that can be employed to redevelop retail properties; ultimately allowing any client from all backgrounds to have the opportunity to create a place to live.

I ended up with this project proving my ability on several levels, both architectural and technical. Due to the small scale of the project, I had to think about the little things that matter, for example improving natural light by adding artificial light and the facilities that are really necessary, like pipework and a shower. The design was mainly about the review of existing spaces and the use of it. For example, the location of the unit can already be of great importance for the rest of the space.

Recommendations
1. One thing for example that can definitely be done to lift the research to an higher level is by including more information about the real estate issues. The design could also be refined, may be in consultation with a product developer.

2. The aim of the project is transforming vacant retail into houses. All the strategies created within the project can be put towards a broader perspective and bigger scale. For example the same way of generating strategies can be applied when transforming vacant office buildings into living spaces. Or when sticking to retail, when retail would be transformed into offices.