REFLECTION P5

PROJECT title: BRIDGING DIVERSITIES
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STUDIO: DESIGN OF THE URBAN FABRIC
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To bring this study to a reflection on process and outcomes, I will first explain the choice of the subject of this study, followed by the selected theories and methodologies. Lastly, I will explain my experience with design as a designer. Every section includes lessons learned as well as suggestions for future studies with respect to diversities.

**Choice of the subject and the relationship with the wider social context**

From the beginning of my study in architecture in Iran, I have always been fascinated by sociology and the human behavioral side of design, specifically when it is focused on the diversity of people in an urban public space. Having such fascination in mind, I moved to the Netherlands. Living in the Netherlands, and specifically in Amsterdam, gave me a new perspective on diversity, influenced mainly by socio-cultural differences.

I am intrigued by the diverse experience and the perception people bring with them to public space and how we as urban designers can use this knowledge as a new input for the design of public space. To further explore my fascination, I decided to study the relationship of social and spatial diversities in an urban public space in Amsterdam: the Rembrandt park. Despite my interest in this topic, it was also quite out of my comfort zone, which made it experimental and full of new learning for me.

The topic of diversities, and in particular socio-cultural diversities, is one of the main debates going on in today’s societies. As part of this study, I try to show that although social diversities sometime are interpreted as social conflicts, “we”, as designers, can practice “diversities” for bridging such diversities. Being a multicultural city, Amsterdam is dealing with social issues related to cultural diversities - in particular in the area of ‘Amsterdam Nieuw-West’, which is the focus of this study.

In such conditions, all these issues reflect on the physical environment, in which “public space” is the crucial one. Within this social context, this project explores the “affordances” of public space and new possibilities by design for the presence and social interaction of diverse groups of people. This is partly by reflecting on the perception of different people of public space and partly by reflecting their use of public space. For this purpose, this study applies the participatory research and design methodologies. This way, the methods are communicative to inhabitants and are able to reflect their thoughts on public space.

In a wider context, this study aims to provide helpful insights to the lively debate about socio-cultural diversities in public spaces of a diverse city like Amsterdam, as well as the contribution of diverse design interventions in creating inclusive diverse public spaces. As a result, the project approach for a section of Amsterdam can be considered as a case study for future studies within a similar social context. Thus, I hope to contribute to the field of the research group ‘design of the urban fabric’.

**Theories, methodologies and process**

In overall, the selected theories and methodologies, which are embodied with the structure of this thesis -analyzing, reading, bridging and vision- appeared very promising to me. They were aimed at analyzing the social and spatial layers in correlation, rather than on an individual basis. This way, the method helped this study to investigate the “affordances” of physical space as a social space with the diverse social representations within.

Firstly, by using the selected methodologies, I had the chance to lively experience the theoretical part, being the symbolic side of urbanism, inclusive social space and the real meaning of diversities, in the everyday lives of the inhabitants in the project area. Amongst the theories selected for the base of this study, the theories by Kevin Lynch (1991) completed by the cultural perspective of Peter Nas (2002) and Herbert Blumer (1969) have proven very useful. In particular, for the purposes of exploring people’s different perceptions of public space, focusing on those groups who are seen less and the possible underlying reasons by means of mental
mapping combined with interviews. At this stage, communication with respondents, using some samples of “mental maps” prior to the interview, were helpful. Regarding the selection of questions, those as “where do you go everyday in the neighborhood?” caused a defensive reaction from some cultural groups as it associated with their privacy. Therefore, it appeared to be more useful when some questions were replaced by generic and approximate ones. Furthermore, being introduced by a member of the community led to a faster process but also better trust from the interviewees themselves. It is notable that this method, although having been very useful in the beginning of the study, could not be used purely for the purpose of design and therefore needed to be examined by other methods as well.

As part of the second stage of this study, the experiences and suggestions of William Whyte (1980) were employed in terms of the necessity of direct observation for exploring the use of public space and design of inclusive social spaces. The method of observation helped to better understand the outcome of the interviews, as well as the relevant literature. In parallel to observation, the method of sketching was added in the course of the process. Sketching new scenarios for the presented situation in the park led to exploring design ideas in the very beginning of the study. This approach helped to steer this study into the direction of the research process towards the final vision.

Overall, the method of observation, although very useful, has some limitations: for instance, it is impossible to have the overview of the whole research area at the same time (Bernard, 2005). So, while recording from one spot, the observant may fail to record issues out of his framed view. Accordingly, the observation can be more accurate by engaging several observants.

Combined with all stages of this study is the method of interviewing. With respect to the interviews conducted with inhabitants and park users, the location of the interview was very important. People in some specific locations appeared more relaxed and communicative. Regarding the selection of questions for the interviews, having specific keywords rather than fixed questions led to innovative questions suitable to every single interviewee and thus wider responses within a fixed structure. Also, considering the selection of interviewees, sometimes one person with a communicative language and knowledge of the area appeared to be a good representative for a big group of people.

Amongst interviews, those in combination with mapping were the most useful in terms of being communicative and participatory to respondents. With the help of interviews, it was found how a similar issue can be presented using different words, knowledge and also captured by different people. Further to the method itself, the sub-tactics of socializing with people, finding the right people for the purposes of the study, asking the right questions and, most importantly, translating answers to patterns for design, have all brought me priceless experiences.

The third stage, being the outcome of the research, has been tested and questioned via interviewing professionals. That helped this study in the final selection of data which were more crucial for the design. In this respect, the interview with Evert Verhagen was the most informative and brought this study to a new level of challenge for design. However, certain sociological points of view were initially missed, which part was later completed by conducting an interview with sociologist Helma Hellinga. Accordingly, this study suggests having interviews not only with urban designers and planners, but also with sociologists who have worked on or experienced the same area. The interview with Helma Hellinga, who is the writer of the book titled “onrust in de stad”, provided a valuable perspective to the stories behind the current issues in the targeted area.

It is notable that amongst the interviews, either with inhabitants or professionals, there were also some interviews which are not reflected directly in this study but have given me knowledge and inspiration for better processing the study as well as the final design.
Regarding having a combination of methodologies for a more precise outcome, this study suggests the value of overlapping of data gathered from what people say, draw and do in public space. In essence, the overlap of their thoughts, words and actions. That is because sometimes people don’t know what they want. Sometimes they know what they want, but they cannot express it precisely in words. Sometimes, they basically don’t mean the same as what they say. Then they draw, but they cannot always draw all what they have in mind. And then they act and react in public space, but even the last part is influenced in part by their perception and in part by the environment with all objects including other people.

In the end, although appearing very challenging, the selected methodologies brought new knowledge to this study, something that could not have been achieved by purely following written theories and methods. Here, the suggestion to designers would be to take more explorative actions rather than only focusing on the series of published literatures and that way to keep some space for experience.

**Design and the Designer**

The design part of this study was developed in parallel to the research process. During every stage, design concepts and ideas drew new outlines for research as research reflected new insights on design.

Driven by the relevant literature reviewed, the research area has been established from the beginning with socio-cultural diversities, mainly due to the presence of immigrants. In parallel, driven by the selected theoretical views, having inclusive adaptable social spaces is a necessity. Having diversities in mind, the designs presents the necessities as possibilities of diverse adaptable design interventions within an urban public space. The “diverse design intervention” is described as a bridge to connect diversities in the platform of the Rembrandt park in Amsterdam. In this stage, the design patterns appeared very useful in terms of translating the analysis into a generic discipline for design. This way, patterns as a method created possibilities for improving contextual design disciplines which can also be applied to other projects within a similar context, design for socio-cultural diversities and interaction.

It should be noted that in the beginning of this project, creating a social space for interacting with others was the main goal and actually also a sort of ‘must’. However, after having experienced the neighborhood, its inhabitants and their stories, watching how they act and considering previous researches conducted, the study helped to experiencing the hidden aspects of interaction: Firstly, interaction cannot be taken as a must. Instead, it has to be taken as an option. Secondly, inclusive design means a design for everyone, including those who want to interact with others, but also those users who prefer less interaction with other groups. Accordingly, the final design supports diversities also in terms of the level of social interaction.

Regarding the cultural diversities, the use of public space divided by cultures and their perception of public space was initially one of the main aims of the study. However, from this study, it follows that it is not possible to divide people by their cultural characteristics. That is partly due to the presence of many cultures, even inside one cultural group. In addition, there are presented overlaps between cultural characteristics. There are cultural differences and there are people from different cultures who act differently. However, not all differences are due to cultures and also the culture is not always the reason for all differences.

The aforementioned was experienced during all stages of this study but mainly by conducting interviews with people of different cultures in the study area using the design illustration for the park (testing the design). The conclusion indicates that, although respondents asked focused questions about different design elements, but that by itself does not provide conclusive evidence for the existence of cultural differences. Rather, it clarifies the presence of different perceptions people have of public space. And that is “diversity” and can create diversities. In addition, society’s statistics
are not fixed and are constantly changing. In such a complex system, we as designers can only act as wise and conscious as possible to select the data which allows the most proper design scenarios and keep the design open for future experience as well as adaptation. This is supported by the vision of this study by proposing diverse adaptable social spaces as the key for attracting a diverse group of people.

To close this reflection, I want to say that an urban designer is the designer of peoples’ perceptions today and all what may shape their perceptions in the future. We are not only the designer of form but also the designer of social flows, peoples’ use or misuse of a place and their social life stories outside of their homes. We are the most influential actors in the presence and interaction of diversities. In addition to being a designer, we are the translator of people’s perceptions, from sociology to physiology, from their minds and behavior to the outline for design.

In essence, people are the main drivers of public space and we are the translators of their demands for spatial design. We can learn a lot from people, even those with the lowest communicative language or level of professional understanding are the best contributors for creating a successful design for people. Design is for people and has to be inclusive to all people.