Reflections

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Choosing to graduate within Explore lab was a step into uncertainty. Not knowing exactly what to expect and how to handle the amount of freedom fortunately did not discourage me. I am extremely happy to have had the opportunity to work within this studio and I consider its organization and atmosphere a relevant contribution to my work. Not only we could choose our own topic but we could also find tutors who have the same interest. Meeting therefore people who are involved and who care about the project makes it very motivating. Resulting environment within the studio where every student works on his or her own fascination is a rich source of inspiration as well as new non-competitive friendships. The atmosphere is very enriching and supportive and although it was often difficult, I enjoyed working on this graduation very much.

Because I could have chosen my own topic as well as methods to research about it, it became a very interesting and challenging year. For many different reasons I chose to explore the topic of designing spaces for people with dementia. The very first idea came out of my personal experience with the disease and existing care homes. This motivation was than even enhanced by the urgency of the situation in general and by constantly increasing numbers of people diagnosed with some kind of dementia. Besides literature, which gave me an expert theoretical background about the disease itself, I decided to test this new knowledge in practice by visiting various elderly homes and by working with people who have dementia. This proved to be a very important source of information. Seeing so many people struggling with the disease as well as with the spaces has been a strong learning moment. I am grateful to have had this opportunity because it has opened my eyes not only to how many people there are. It has also opened my eyes to how demanding the work of all nurses and carers is and how strong they need to be both physically and mentally. Thanks to having a chance to peak into the life within a nursing home, my beliefs and intentions could grow stronger. Talking to people who have many years of experience reveals lot of practical, everyday problems. It especially shows some organizational as well as spatial complications of existing nursing homes that very often lay in small details and that are hard to anticipate from an outsider’s view.

Having a personal experience with dementia was very helpful but double edged at the same time. On one hand, being involved in the problematic on an academic as well as personal level can sometimes be difficult and counterproductive. Dealing personally with the amount of new expert information about the disease itself and about ways to deal with it can sometimes be overwhelming. It is then easy to get bogged down by sensitivity of the problem and be
less objective. On the other hand, it was very helpful because it gave me a strong motivation to start the graduation as well as to finish it. During the process, it also helped me better understand the problematic I was researching about. It gave me a good starting position and it helped me very much while working with people who have dementia as well as during all the site visits.

The following process of combining an academic research with a practical outcome has been a learning process as well. Defining themes and design principles for the design was certainly very helpful but the design process itself showed how double edged most of them really are. Already during the site visits I could see how some well-intended measures did not work well or failed completely. On contrary, experiencing life within different nursing homes revealed things which were very relevant and which I would have never considered as such.

Knowing dementia and its consequences as well as many practical issues however often made me question some of the design steps. Anticipating the resulting contradictions of design decisions often got me stuck. That however triggered further research questions which I initially omitted in the research. The resulting work was then developing itself in continuous circles. It was not at all a linear process which was sometimes hard to process in the written form. However, thanks to the research topic being practical, I could very well relate it to the design which helped to a great extent.

Learning from dementia has been a great lesson. Spatially, such process of learning and improving can not only lead to improving spaces for people with dementia but it can also help architects broaden their sense of space, its boundaries and its qualities. It can help enlarge their notion of environment when seen through eyes of disability. People with dementia are not the only disabled community and there are many ways of perceiving space and architecture. Disabled people form the largest minority in the world and offer a great opportunity to understand and accept different forms of receptions not only to architects. It is therefore worth understanding and accepting various notions of space where disabilities, including dementia, offer a guiding hand.

Learning to design for dementia is also a great chance to take a step back and reflect on the society as a whole. Getting to know the disease and its consequences is an opportunity to shift our focus back towards the basic, sensory experience of architecture which is to provide shelter and enrich our lives at every moment. Coming back to basics through environments which are safe, aesthetically pleasing through materials, lights, sounds or scale and proportions are beneficial to all of us, no matter the diagnosis.
Because dementia, as sad and difficult it is, has the power to strip us, humans, from all our roles, statuses and expectations, it can clearly show what truly matters in life as well as in space. Learning from the disease brings us back to basic qualities we all share as human beings and which are equally beneficial to all of us. Realizing how much we have in common and how it is very often hidden behind our lifestyles, expected behaviour or prejudices has been one of the biggest lessons learned. I could see how we tend to forget about and neglect the simple enjoyments of everyday life and how people appreciate them only later. We rush through important things in order to catch up with something we might one day forget. Realizing this has been a priceless experience which I wish to take further with me. During the whole process, I learned a lot myself and hopefully I will be able to use this knowledge further in my work as well as in my life.