Reflection

This reflection will reflect on the actual research on liveability in shrinking cities and the process that was gone through for this research.

This research was conducted as completion of the Master Management in the Built Environment at the faculty of Architecture of the TU Delft. From February 2015 till June 2015 the research was designed by writing a research proposal. From June 2015 the actual research was conducted.

Research summary

It is expected more cities in Europe are going to encounter shrinkage because of changing demographics. Shrinkage can also occur because of a negative migration balance. When a city shrinks, municipalities take measures on the urban hardware, software and mindware in order to maintain the liveability for the remaining residents. This research studied the measures taken in two shrinking cities: Heerlen in the Netherlands and Gelsenkirchen in Germany. Both former mining cities. Most measures are taken on the urban hardware and software aspects. Measures include demolishment of dwellings, redesign of the public space and involving residents in the redevelopment plans. In both cities that were studied, there is no significant change in liveability noticeable because of the measures taken. Since it is expected that when a municipality takes no measures, the liveability decreases, there must have been some positive effects because of the measures. Which measures caused which effect can, however, not be determined because municipalities implement multiple measures at the same time. It does seem to be important to involve residents in the planning and to take measures which have a visible result so that residents notice the attention from the municipality.

Reflection - Research

In order to answer the research questions, a literature study was done and governmental documents were read. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with urban designers of both cities in order to gain insight in the measures that were taken by the municipality and the reasons behind these measures. In order to gain more insight in the effectiveness of the measures, surveys were conducted and there were small conversations with residents of both cities. Besides the collection of information of others, both cities were visited to see what was done in these cities.

The literature survey was helpful in that it provided a general overview of the forces behind shrinkage and the general actions of municipalities such as countering shrinkage or accepting shrinkage. The documentation of the actions of the municipalities was, however, not always available which made it time consuming to find out what the municipalities had done. The interviews provided insight in the way of working of the municipalities and the reasons behind certain projects. The interviews also provided a general overview of the actions and goals of the municipalities. The interviews were therefore very helpful. For the surveys, it was difficult to find respondents. In Heerlen, I was able to spread the survey through an acquaintance which provided some responses but far from enough, in my opinion. Furthermore, were there no respondents that were from Passart or MSP while those are two neighbourhoods that gained special attention from the municipality. Therefore, I visited Heerlen so I could get some responses from residents of those neighbourhoods. This was very time-consuming and did not gain that much responses. This visit made it however possible to meet residents of these neighbourhoods and have a little chat with them as a complement to the surveys. In Gelsenkirchen, it was not possible to get responses without
going there. In Gelsenkirchen, however, residents were not that willing to participate in the survey. The response rate in Gelsenkirchen was, therefore, really low. The responses did, however, provide some insight in the opinion of residents on their city. Visiting the cities was somewhat helpful in that it provided an impression of the atmosphere of the cities. It was good that the cities were visited several times because the weather influences the atmosphere to some extent and by visiting in the summer and in the winter, this gave a more complete idea of the atmosphere in the cities.

When it comes to the planning that was made in June 2015, it was difficult to stick to the planning. For many aspects it took more time to complete them and sometimes it was easier to postpone taking the next step because it felt somewhat frightening to go to the next phase. This caused for this research to take more time than expected at the beginning of this research.

Reflection - Process

At the beginning of this research, the start of writing the research proposal, I was really excited to start. I was very interested in the liveability in shrinking cities because people often imagine an abandoned city while that is almost never the situation. I started to look into the process of shrinkage and it soon became clear to me that shrinkage is a complex process because of the interplay of various aspects. Furthermore, I noticed that there was not much research done on the liveability in shrinking cities which made it even more interesting to research this subject. Because of the complexity of shrinkage, I had to choose cities to focus my research on. In the Netherlands there were only two cities that were appropriate so I chose the city that was involved in a regional approach to cope with shrinkage and chose a city abroad that had gone through a similar process. After the selection of the cities, the history of these cities was investigated and the various programmes that were carried out in these cities to cope with shrinkage were gathered. In this, I had some struggles with the question how detailed I should describe these programmes and the measures of these programmes. Also, I found it difficult to organise the large amounts of information. After the collection of the programmes and measures, the, for me, hardest part of this research began. The effects of the measures had to be assessed. This was a difficult process because of the limited time and the complexity of the concept of liveability. Furthermore, I found it difficult to formulate the conclusion of the research. This was mainly due to the fact that I did not dare to use all the information I had obtained because I doubted the scientific quality of the information since some of the information was not statistically relevant or I thought it was not scientific at all as was the case with the information from observations. Later, I was less hesitant to use this information. This made it easier for me to formulate some conclusions.

Conducting this research and writing the research report has been a great learning experience. I believe I have improved my German and English language skills and I learned a lot about writing a research report. In following research processes, I should be less hesitant to take the next step in the research process and I should keep in mind that I am aloud to make mistakes during the process as making mistakes is part of the research process. Furthermore, I learnt to use more of the available information.