Kattenburg: Working/Living on the edge - A Reflection

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Relationship between the theme of the graduation lab and the subject/case study chosen by the student within this framework

The theme of the Dutch Dwelling Studio Kattenburg is densification in the inner city. The object to densify by 200% in a post-war neighbourhood in Amsterdam was further extended by my own chosen research, questioning ‘how densification on the boundary between two neighbourhoods must occur’. This question was defined after intense urban analysis which resulted in clear advantages to maintain Kattenburg as is, with its large dwellings suitable for families in a prime, surprisingly green, location at the centre of Amsterdam. Furthermore a tutorial researching densification approaches presented several methods, one of which was densifying on in-between lots. With its 50 meters in width the Kattenburgerstraat offers this space to densify, in addition to an opportunity to redesign the boundary between the just reopened ‘Marine terrein’ and Kattenburg itself.

This ‘densification on the boundary’ was further specified responding to the programmatic characters of the two bordering neighbourhoods. One side, Kattenburg, being entirely residential, the other side eager for redevelopment, reopening after being closed off for 500 years, with the more work related atmosphere of the Royal Navy. Coinciding these two programs (living and working) in one collective building corresponds with current trends of blurring boundaries, globalization, increasing ratio of women working, and new technologies as internet and online-economies. Due to these trends the geographical location of a significant portion of work has become unimportant, resulting in an increase in people working from home. Densification implies more people living on less space, greater stress on traffic, infrastructure, green spaces and so forth. By introducing an old but neglected building type that combines dwelling and work space, problems that emerge from densification can be reduced to some extent. This will be further elaborated in the next section.
The relationship between the project and the wider social context

At TU Delft we tend to narrow down to the engineering part, the physical aspects of our environment, yet considering the complete spectrum of social aspects, trends and dynamics can enrichen the design. Predominantly it is people we should be designing for.

The projects’ theme of reinstating home-based work in the city is in my opinion extremely relevant for the wider social context. Post war neighbourhoods are at the end of their life-span, waiting for resurrection. Their mono-functional residential character has proven to have failed in meeting current necessities. After the industrialization functional zoning was a response to the intolerable urban conditions caused by the ‘evils’ of home based work and industrial pollution. Yet social housing projects, built according to this zoning, removed a means to earn a living for the poorest and imposed a rigidly gendered division of labour, sending women back home, replacing the family economy with a male-dependent driven one. Moreover home-based work was one of the ingredients that had created busy, lively, sociable neighbourhoods. These characteristics seem to lack in current post-war districts, as well as in Kattenburg.

A 25% increase of home-based workers (working from home more than 8 hours a week ‘papa dagen’), the hesitation of companies to grant fixed contracts and the politically driven ease of starting up new companies (booming ZZPers), are all important factors that reinforce my projects’ relevance.

Relation between research and design

For my graduation project I finally got the time to do what I love doing and which lacked time in the previous years at architecture school: I read many books. A few of them are: Christopher Alexander's Pattern Language, Kevin Lynch’s Image of the City, The City at Eye Level, Job Roos’ De ontdekking van de Opgave, Dick van Gamerens Revisies van de Ruimte, Juriaan van Meels Work Places today, Francis Holliss’ Beyond Live/Work, Psarras Architecture and Narrative.

My design was informed by my research, due to the fact that every time a question arose, or a design decision lingered I would read a new book. Apart from being time consuming this is deceitful, because
it offers many new ideas, facts, possibilities and approaches, distracting one from the main theme. For someone like me, who struggles to stay on the highway, always taking side roads, reading (too much) is a dangerous method. Yet I perceive my design decisions as empty if not based on having read various approaches on it. The advantage is that I will always take this knowledge with me, but the disadvantage is the more you read, the more you know how little you know.

From the hindsight, by reading books you stay in abstraction. It would have been better to research reference projects and case studies earlier on in the process, especially for the detailing and materialization of my building. It is arrogant to think no building like yours has ever been built.

During the process I performed many sub-researches. The topic of home-based work provided a continuous polarity of different design considerations for my building: (non)-flexibility/ noisy-quiet/ public-private/ hot-cold/ company-homely expression/ visibility-invisibility/ clean-dirty/ inside-outside/ storage/ professional vs residential circulation. Questions arose like: What is the difference in façade between a residential building and a commercial building? Is it the amount of glass? The materiality? The entrances? The Plinth? The windows? The signage? How does a company profile itself on a façade that is shared with many different enterprises on different floors, but also with residents? Researching references (streets and signage, Rotterdam’s signage regulations, and drawing possibilities on my façade) led me from a led lit façade to a more neutral concrete façade, considering the nuisance of bright lights facing the neighbours’ bedroom window more important than the company’s marketing options (perhaps online?). Furthermore literature had tipped me to consider velocity of passers-by, and the fact that most eyes stay on the plinth, be it that from walking on an arcaded sidewalk you will never see the façade above it.

In this graduation project I had the time to test my ideas through an iterative process. An example is a window study I executed through drawing. After a week of modifying window positions in the façade and simultaneously the floor plans, I came to the conclusion that an older version of the week before was most preferable. This then seems like wasted time and effort, but it isn’t, because now I can say for sure that my windows are placed as they should.
Besides drawing and reading, model making was prolific to mainly communicate my ideas, and test and fine tune the spaces like the arcade or the mew on the ground floor. Thus I made models ranging from 1:1000, 1:500 to 1:200, 1:100 and 1:50. The danger of 3D programs as Revit, which I used too much in my opinion, is that you waste too much time drawing the whole building in detail, instead of researching one aspect of the building and then moving on to the next.

Also excursions and visiting other cities each weekend, up until the last month before my p4, was a very fruitful method of inspiration. Every weekend a new question would occupy my thinking, perceiving my free time city-trips with a new frame of reference. This resulted in measuring arcade height and widths in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, researching luminescent columns in Antwerp, studying waterfronts in Dublin and Maassluis, touching concrete façade textures in Arnhem, as well as excursions within Delft itself. Also visiting many museums in my free time and taking long bike trips seemed to reset my brain, refresh my thinking, preparing myself for a new week of research and design. All clichés seem to arise here: architects should travel, see, draw, read and make models.

The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student in this framework

The Dwelling Chair of TU Delft itself has no appropriated methodological line of approach. The appointed ‘research by design’ infers the student to prove his/her independence, architectural eloquence and practicality within a complex context of excess information in design fed by research. This excess of information and independence was the main struggle. At times I felt lost, indecisive and insecure about which of all contrasting advices to adopt and which not. Eventually I learned how important it is to stand behind your own project and stand up for it. If the designer hesitates, then others most definitely will.

Regarding the Research seminars, I would have preferred the topic of my research during the first half year to be more beneficial for the design itself. Commencing with neighbourhood identities as a topic, itinerantly speculating about the research question, I drifted away from reality towards a world of neighbourhood narratives. This was based on everything but scientific sources; neighbourhood diaries,
art projects, video and audio files. I was stubborn, leaving aside the fact that it is essential at TU Delft to research something you can actually translate to a physical product. Furthermore there was a clash in the Delft method of needing an overall theme/concept, and the eagerness to use a bottom up approach. After the P2 I straightened my route, specifying one aspect that came back in many of the stories: life at home, above the shop, the tiny enterprises like the vacuum cleaner rental, the milkman, the grocers, the shipyard – all work-home based narratives. All which are lacking in today’s Kattenburg, due to its modernistic zoning. For a project with the limited amount of time of 1 year, it is necessary to research a topic which offers references, buildings to study, already within the discipline of the built environment. Perhaps it was overly ambitious or unrealistic to intend to invent a new architecture based on nostalgic memories and stories of people’s lives in a neighbourhood that doesn’t even exist anymore. Besides building for and with people, architects have the role of improving things, of seeing things differently, of introducing new realities. Being enchanted by memories and histories of a place can petrify all intentions to change anything, and narrow down the scope solely facing the past. In this situation every step forward seems wrong. Finalizing my research on narratives over the summer helped me retire from this vicious circle and provided the insight to become more concrete.

As a last insight I would like to address the fact that we are not studying how to build just a house. We are studying mass housing. This means we should abide by the rules of series, the economical and social advantages of collectiveness. Interestingly the last months I have found myself mainly simplifying my building to make it clearer, less complex, removing quirks and oddities. I acknowledge that 62 dwellings accessed through four different types of circulation, with each entrance at a different location on every floor and dozens of typologies is not economically feasible, nor practical for the shaft layout. Yet a graduation project has a different point of gravity with intentions that are distinct: those of research, education and insatiable enthusiasm for exploration.

Thank you!