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Reflection

This reflection will evaluate on the process and outcome of both the research paper and the design project. It positions the graduation project within a personal and a wider social framework, regarding the relationships between research and design and ethical considerations.
Positioning of the graduation project
- Personal and social framework -

Personal (master) track
This graduation project is the result of a fascination for retail design, which started during my Bachelor of Architecture at the TU Delft. A minor in retail design introduced me to brand architecture, after which I decided to follow some courses at the faculty of Industrial Design. I learned to start the designing process with a certain brand identity and from there on design a three-dimensional brand environment. During a Retail Summer School and an internship I explored the practical appliances of brand-driven architecture. My graduation at ExploreLab was a logical continuation of the track I followed before. By choosing a brand (MUJI) and explore the options of a translation into architecture, I tried to combine the different scales I worked with earlier in my study.

The research question & methods
At the beginning of the research phase, I was searching for the right balance between retail strategies and architecture. Where my research paper started with a focus on the use of branding strategies, it shifted more to retail architecture in general. Eventually, the research could be divided into two focus points: one on the future of retail design and the other on the relations between brand communities, their lifestyle and the translation into retail architecture.

A literature study on the future of shopping and retail design put the graduation project within a defined social context. Brand identity, brand communities and future retail visions became predominant themes of the case studies. The case studies regarding (brand) communities, ‘the Cathedral of Consumerism’ and ‘the Palazzo Boutique’, pointed out some spatial elements used in retail architecture.

Appliance
As the case studies pointed out, brand communities can be compared to other types of communities. Their architecture is used to gain loyal customers. The themes described in the research paper are not only relevant for retail architecture. They can be translated into all buildings that want to attract and host a certain identity- and lifestyle-based community. Think of faith-based, interest-based, leisure-based and business-based communities. Their semi-public buildings (churches, offices, event spaces, museums etcetera) and communities all deal with themes like accessibility, hierarchy, exploration and interaction.

Besides this, retail seems to be popping up almost everywhere. Consequently, train stations, museums, airports, etc. are all becoming branded environments. The interaction between brand and context is thus not only a source of discussion for city centers and shopping malls. A lot of different types of buildings will deal with the same considerations as this graduation project.
Image 1. The Church of Consumerism

Image 2. The Palazzo Boutique
Ethical considerations
- Brand versus context -

The graduation project pointed out a friction between retail architecture and the urban environment. In future city centers, brands will be pushing their identities to public spaces. Flagship stores pop up everywhere, transforming existing and new buildings into brand palaces. They try to gain loyal customers, lure people into their stores and care only about their own building. Neglecting the context in order to stand out seems like a simple solution in showing the own brand identity. But how far can brand architecture go in seducing people to enter and buy products without destroying a coherent street view?

Specific versus generic
Because of the quick developing image of the retail industry, the permanence of their brand environments has to be kept into mind. A different collection or retail concept should be made possible within the same buildings.

The MUJI store has to be adaptable for a new MUJI collection, as well as a total different function. The main intention of the design is to be facilitating to the brand, but be flexible for future changes as well. It forms a framework that can host many different functions. The (wooden) infill is a second structure which is specific to the MUJI brand identity. It forms separate construction which is easily dissembled from the larger load bearing construction.
Relationship between research and design

A new approach on retail architecture
Online shopping has found its place within society, changing the definition of shopping and the way retailers approach their customers. Stores now not only compete with each other, but also with the online market. This competition results in differentiation. The role of mono-branded flagship stores becomes more and more important, since it can be a part of the brand strategy. These flagship stores reposition themselves within the social life of people, going from sales-led to experience-led. Shopping is increasingly becoming a social activity and offers a place for people of the brand community to gather. These trends in retail, treated in the research paper, have had an important influence on the program of the design project.

Since MUJI Rotterdam will be the first MUJI store in the Netherlands, it is essential to create a strong brand community from the beginning. The MUJI store is a public showroom and a community building for those admiring their way of life. However, the shop is not the only programmatic element in the building that reflects the brand identity. The MUJI Hotel makes sure people surround themselves with MUJI products for a longer amount of time. It is a showroom for longer stays. In this way, customers can experience the lifestyle on a different level than in the store. The restaurant and cafe show another aspect of the MUJI lifestyle.

Both the experience economy and hybridization have had consequences for the program of the design project. With the diversity of the program, a complete image of the brand and the possibilities of their products and services is shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trends</th>
<th>Retail landscape</th>
<th>Store design</th>
<th>MUJI Rotterdam</th>
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<tr>
<td>Experience economy</td>
<td>Sales-led to experience-led</td>
<td>Public showrooms</td>
<td>Program</td>
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<td>Hybridization</td>
<td>Mix of retail and other public functions</td>
<td>Lifestyle community building</td>
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<td>Cafe</td>
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Image 3. Influence of trends on the program of the design project.
Reflecting a brand identity & positioning MUJI
The way material, composition and other architectural resources are used to create a specific atmosphere in stores, shows the passion of the retailers and retail architects to make the shops function as an extension of the brand.

However, the case studies pointed out that not only these quite obvious resources can be used to reflect a certain brand identity. Spatial elements can strengthen the shopping experience as well.

The design project was based on the brand identity of MUJI (no brand quality goods). Since this is a Japanese lifestyle brand, the brand identity of MUJI has links with Japanese philosophies. Simplicity and other aesthetic norms are reflected within their products. Since the research pointed out that the retail design should be in line with the brand identity, some references to their products and Japanese references were made in both the store as the hotel. By making scale models, the material palette and the dimensions of spaces were explored.

Spatial elements & organization of the store
The four themes discussed in the research paper have reflected themselves into different aspects of the spatial organization of the store. The design project pointed out new applications of the themes within a branded environment, forming an extension of the research.

Accessibility can be recognized in the transition zones of the building, like the engawa in Japanese architecture. The void at the entrance shows resemblance to the two case studies. Playing with overview on the one hand and the different worlds of the modules on the other hand shows the hierarchy of the store. Spatial imagination is created by the atmosphere of an ancient Japanese city centre, with infinite tiny houses, stacked onto each other. Wandering through the rooms, customers are automatically drawn upon the stairs, leading them to different floors. Voids around the large load bearing structure create interaction between floors and people. The translucent materials create mystic images, with a changing, interactive, facade which lightness up in the night. More as being a fixed guideline, the themes were open to different interpretation during the different stages and scales of the design process.

Image 4. Scale model of the MUJI store.
Looking back on the design process, with MUJI Rotterdam I tried to find the right balance between context (the city center of Rotterdam) and a reflection of the design language into architecture. The research paper helped me to develop a vision on the future of shopping, and tools that can be used creating a space for a brand community. During the design process I took position in the dilemma of brand versus context and made the MUJI store both generic as specific in different scales of the design.

Image 5. Purpose of the MUJI flagship store.