Reflection - Franka Fontijn

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Track: Landscape Architecture  
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Research & Design
The theoretical research I have done on Walkability, Placemaking and Access & Linkage is aiming towards a design that can reconnect places that have been separated by infrastructure and making connections that are not just serving traffic circulation but also serve as a social space for social interaction and exchange between people. In order to make a successful design that improves the walkability in a city like Toronto, or any city with a similar structure that is dominated by cars, it is necessary to know the conditions for walkability, like at what distance essential uses need to be located, or what the maximum distance to a public transit station should be. The analysis on the city of Toronto has helped me to establish which location has problems in connectivity but also has the potential in becoming a more walkable area of the city. The project site has problems in connectivity because of infrastructural barriers. They need to be diminished in order to create potential for walkability. Conditions from Access & Linkage can help, but design plays a more important role here, there are no clear rules that can directly be implemented on the site.

Graduation topic and Flowscapes
The studio topic Flowscapes explores infrastructure as a type of landscape and landscape as a type of infrastructure. It is about redefining infrastructure and that is exactly what I am aiming towards in my graduation project. The topic of my graduation: ‘Streets as places’ rediscovers the social role of streets and makes them part of the urban landscape again, where people and social exchange play a role. A multi-layered understanding of the site is required in this studio. History plays an important role in understanding how the role of streets have changed, but also site specifically, how the relationship with the waterfront in Toronto has changed and what locations have an important historical meaning and are therefore essential in the connection with the waterfront (like St. Lawrence Market).

The process and scientific relevance
Starting my Graduation project, I did a lot of theoretical research and read many articles about the influence of car ownership on the city, and new policies on improving city life. Different theories on improving city life like Jan Gehl with ‘New City Life’ and Jane Jacob with ‘The death and life of great American cities’ have inspired me, but when doing more research on my research location: Toronto, I realized that I had to focus more, specifically on walkability and the improvement of streets as social space in order to be able to reconnect to the waterfront. In order to achieve this walkability, streets need to be movement space, where Access & Linkage is the key, and also a social space, where Placemaking comes in. The two component of walkability: Access and Linkage and Placemaking have guided my analysis in order to investigate where the problems and opportunities are lying. Based on this, a concept for an area will be the starting point of more detailed design of some key components that will contribute to reach my objective. From my research, one can learn that in order to connect two places that are fragmented by infrastructure, it is not enough to break down the barrier and that a physical connection is not enough. It is also about placemaking: creating a visual attractive and interesting space that invites people, making them stay and interact. Especially in large-scale cities like Toronto, where distances are much longer and the urban grain is bigger, it is important that there is enough context in order to make streets a social space.
Relevance to a wider social, professional and scientific framework

The research topic is a very relevant topic because cities are growing, becoming denser and together with car ownership this is becoming a problem. If cities are becoming denser, facilities will have to densify as well. Cars are then much less efficient than pedestrian movement. Therefore, it is good to think about reinterpreting the structure of cities. Since streets are the most enduring element and also the most determinative element of a city (chapter 1.1), it is logical to take a closer look at streets. The research done here in Toronto can also be applied to other North-American city centers with a high density of facilities. Next to this, waterfronts all over the world are being redeveloped but are often cut off from the city center by railway tracks or highways that used to have purposes for trafficking goods from the harbour to the inlands. This projects offers solutions for the reconnection with the waterfront, but also for the use of the left over non-places besides or below a highway for recreational purposes.

Ethical issues and dilemmas

When doing my research I have often been in a dilemma on whether I could remove cars from streets. In the end, I decided that in order to improve the social life on the street and improving the walkability, I had to set an example with my design. I have actually been quite careful and only made 3 streets into pedestrian streets, while at the same time adding a new streetcar connection. The connection from Queens Quay and Lake Shore Boulevard to Parliament Street, leading towards the highway, is still intact, but Lake shore boulevard becomes a slow traffic Boulevard, like its name is suggesting already.

Making these changes, I want to support pedestrian and bike movement in a specific location in Toronto, where new mixed neighbourhoods (Pan Am village) and areas under development are located that can set a modern and Western example. I am positive about the effect that these actions will have on people’s traffic behaviour. By providing people with less high-speed traffic networks, making it less efficient for people to drive their car in dense urban areas, they will be likely to use other means of transport. These other means need to be provided; therefore, I have made a new streetcar line and improved the network for bikes and pedestrians.