Towards collaborative approaches in urban regeneration
A case study in the Latin American context
Reflection on the MSc Thesis

Juan Carlos Romero
Juan Carlos Romero
4516621

1st Mentor
Dr. ir. T.A. (Tom) Daamen MSc
Urban Development Management

2nd Mentor
Dr. D.K. (Darinka) Czischke Ljubetic
Housing Management

External Examiner
Drs. C.P. (Kees) Dol

Urban Development Management
Master Management in the Built Environment
Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment
Delft University of Technology

June 2017

Contact Information
J C Romero Bogoya
jromerobog@gmail.com
Introduction

The process of developing a Master Thesis, and more broadly a research project, is at the same time a thrill and a challenge, although it might seem more the latter than the former. Therefore, it is relevant to reflect upon it at several points along the way, from the initial approach, to framing the proposal, developing the content, achieving the first results and concluding on the findings.

This section presents the aforementioned considerations over the research process, along with the different milestones achieved in between. It discusses the scientific relevance and validity of the results, as well as the societal relevance and utilisation potential of the research. Furthermore, there is a reflection on the methodology and the research design. Finally, there is an evaluation of the research process.

Research Relevance

Scientific relevance

The field of Urban Development research is, as its practice, a broad and wide encompassing one. This implies a conversion of disciplines and theories, which interact and collide, maintaining the discussion at a continuous high. This research is no stranger to this approach and from the beginning it tried to fit into the current field of knowledge.

The use of a mixed-method approach responds to this prerogative. The benefit of using diverse methods for a qualitative research is twofold. On one hand, different methods are used to analyse different kinds of data and later on be able to compare the theoretical framework with the empirical results. That is, it helps to analyse data, that otherwise wouldn’t correlate to each other. On the other hand, it gives validity to the results, mainly by triangulation of the different outcomes.

Societal relevance

The choice for a case study that is ongoing and at the same time an experimental project in several aspects is relevant to evaluate its performance and lessons learned from the process, while at the same time offering the option to adjust elements or improve the general performance. Furthermore, it offers the possibility to bring academia closer to the practical environment, which results particularly valuable in a context in which such collaboration is not usual.

An important factor is related to the organisation that the theory and the case study focus on. The main implication being the collaboration between actors from different parts of society and the possibility to discuss the theoretical framework with them. This becomes relevant as a way to understand the different positions present in such a project and in a larger scale in every societal context. The possibility to open dialogue channels with and between such a diverse array of participants proves to be a valuable objective on its own.
Furthermore, it is on the best interest of the research, as well as of the different organisations involved in the project that collaborated in it, to review the various processes and be able to understand separate points of view and ways of analysing a single project or event. Thus, the objective is to make the information collected available first for the involved actors and more widely to society at large.

Research Design

The research design, which doubled as the thesis structure, was an important factor to organize not only the content, but also the process of the research. It provided a framework for every step, even if it’s a broad conceptual base. It was also relevant that the design was kept unchanged, even if the focus or the methodology changed along the way.

Research Methods

The strictly qualitative method selection can be regarded as a limitation on the research, but also as an opportunity to further conduct research in the future. This choice has two sides. First, the fact that is an ongoing project, hinders the possibility to evaluate its results. Adding up to this is the long-term nature of urban processes. Second, the research topic and units of analysis call for qualitative methods, given the difficulty to measure relational aspects. It can be said that any given measure in this subject will result in an incomplete view, due to its social nature.

Literature Review

The literature review was, after the interviews, the second richest process of the thesis. It became clear from the beginning that the subject to be dealt with was very broad and covered a large deal of diverse fields. This was both a challenge and an opportunity. On one hand, it was a challenge in the sense that keeping the focus on what could be useful and not proved to be demanding. With each new article a new set of subjects and references opened up, broadening the scope of the research more than it reduced it. On the other hand, it was a chance to expand my knowledge about subjects that resulted interesting, whether for academic or personal reasons. It can be said that each piece left a valuable lesson, either for the research or, more importantly, for the future.

A key factor in the approach to literature was to define it as an iterative process. Coming back and forth between theory and practice made the exploration richer and more diverse. At the same time, discussing the findings of each stage with people from different backgrounds, that is from academia, practicing professionals, or colleagues, improved the understanding of the texts and further paved the way for finding more interesting literature.

As mentioned before, the process kept increase the scope of the literature review, and that may be its main drawback. The process of reviewing sources is time consuming, and sometimes replaced time spent on synthesising the collected information. Therefore, it is relevant to maintain an iterative attitude towards the lesson learning process from literature as well, as it would facilitate the overall research process.
Case Studies

The selection of case studies for an actor centred research, with focus on relational aspects comes as a logic step. It has to be said that the possibility to analyse the practical aspect of any theory is a key step in research and help to balance the distance that exists between the two fields in many cases.

An important step during the research process was the shift from a comparative case study design, with two in depth cases, to a single case study. This choice had several underlying factors. The selected subject is not widely practiced in urban regeneration around the world, with the specific criteria that were selected. This resulted in a short list of possible cases that would result difficult to study with sufficient depth. The large amount of information to be processed, coupled with the time limitation, resulted on a scope reduction. The approach to the main case and its participants, that came early on the process, proved to be more challenging than expected. The availability of time from the respondents was very limited and their responses, highly inconsistent at first, but very rich towards the ending. A consideration on cultural context and interest on the work I was performing, also led to limit the extent of the research.

Primary and secondary data analysis

The importance of having both primary and secondary data, from diverse sources proved to be a key point for a deeper analysis and understanding of the case. Primary data collection will be discussed in depth in the next section. Secondary data collection was a very interesting process. First, there is an important part of the documentation that is made of legal documents. These are lengthy and written in a dense language sometimes, which makes it difficult to grasp their main points.

Second, the lack of abundant research in the field and more specifically surrounding the case (mostly due to the fact that it is an ongoing development, but also to a less research oriented context) called for a wider scope regarding the document search. This included the use of grey literature to complement the existing documentation.

Interviews

The interview provided, by far, the deepest understanding to the specific process and to collaboration in urban development in general. The amount of data that was collected from talks with people many different backgrounds was helpful to reconstruct the process, on one hand, and to understand different positions and attitudes towards the project, in the other.

This particular part of the research came late in the process, which proved to be a challenge, in the sense that most of the raw data to be analysed was collected in the very end of the writing process. However, it is relevant to note that it gave a wider panorama to the research subject. Regarding this subject, it was concluded that a larger pool of data resources was more valuable than a limited one, thus encouraging me to conduct the maximum number of interviews possible.

On a final thought, the interviews were valuable not only from an academic point of view, but also from a personal one. I can say that my position towards the way that urban development
is conducted was greatly shaped by some of the talks that I had. Besides the readiness of every interviewee to share their knowledge on the project, I deem more valuable, their eagerness to discuss also subjects beyond the research and having very interesting talks about the city and society at large.

Research Process

The conception of a research as an iterative process has been very helpful to review the decisions made in every step, adjust the focus of the research and continuously reduce the scope of the process. In this sense, a particularly helpful framework was that of grounded theory, because it allowed to give sense to the constant appearance of new literature and information, as well as to structure it within the research.

Then, time was a relevant concern. The limitation to one case is related also to the duration of the research. On the other hand, it opens up a handful of possibilities for further research in the same field. Finally, an important concern regarding the transferability of knowledge to similar contexts remained as an objective. That seemed a reasonable motive to understand similar cases, albeit in a more restricted, less profound manner.

The overall process was highly enjoyable, in particular when more information became available, which encouraged me to hold on to it. It also opened up a large number of possibilities regarding future research and possible endeavours, not only in the field of urban regeneration, but also in policy generation, academia and even politics. Therefore, the greatest reward from the process was to keep my curiosity alive and broadening its scope.