Reflection Report P4

Graduation project

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INTRODUCTION

This is the reflection report of my (Lennart van Heijningen) graduation project. I will explain how I started the project, which research group I chose and the approach I had intended for my project. This is accompanied with my current observation: did I make the right decisions? did I follow this research approach? If not, is that bad? What could have done better?

 eventual this will lead to what I think of my design. Is it linked good enough with my research? And how well does it add up to social and scientific discussion of my topic?

START OF THE PROJECT

When I started the project I found it not that easy to pick a topic. I knew I wanted to focus on a middle-sized Dutch city at regional scale and wanted to research in a more spatial sense, but what and where exactly was still uncertain.

Later on I realized that my own home-city, Gouda, was a perfect case to look more closely too. Not only in personal sense, because I lived almost my whole life in this city, but also because I found it quite interesting how the influences of The Hague and Rotterdam were more and more visible in the city of Gouda. Gouda first always felt like it was quite far removed from the busy urbanity of the Randstad. I found it fascinating what kind of role Gouda could play in the possible spatial transition to be integrated in the Randstad.

A more general topic that fascinated me was the revitalization/transformation of the built environment. Perfecting the current city to make it more sustainable and more attractive for the current inhabitants instead of only expanding more and more. It motivated me is that it was very likely that during my graduation project I have to deal with already existing structures in the current city.

PICKING A RESEARCH GROUP

I found that the research group ‘Design of the Urban Fabric’ fitted the most to my graduation subject.

“Design of the urban fabric refers to the physical urban environment (elements, materials, form, scales, density and networks), and to its psychological, socio-cultural, ecological, managerial and economic structures. The urban fabric theme studies the relations between tangible and intangible structures in different contexts, and is grounded in the Dutch tradition of urbanism.” – bk.tudelft.nl.

Observation now

The aim of my graduation project was to propose (several) urban design(s) that integrate Gouda better into its environment. Themes like spatial integration at multiple scales, spatial quality and how people use the city would play a big role in my project, so that is why I picked this research group of Design of the Urban Fabric. I still have no regret choosing this group.

CHOSEN METHODOLOGY & APPLICATION

Defining the problem (first half year)

In my P1 report (orientation) and later explained in more detail in my P2 report (thesis plan) I defined the problem statement and aim of my project. This was done with the help of studying literature and a quick-scan of several documents and maps of Gouda. The literature I studied was based on the critique of how the current urban developments (urban sprawl) takes place in the Randstad, coming from people like Buursink, Geuze, Heynen and Neutelings. The modern day lifestyles, their behaviour and the theme of liveability in general are based on the literature of d’Acci, Fishman, Friedman & Miller, Ouweward and Reindorp & Pilet and the spatial principles of the green-blue system, an urban tool that I investigated and was based on theories of Dramstad & Olson, Pötz & Bleuzé and Tummers & Tummers-Zuurmond.
This investigation leaded to the main research question of my project: “What spatial configurations will allow Gouda to be better integrated into the green-blue system of the Randstad and so create a better liveability for its inhabitants and the metropolitan region as a whole?”

Answering this question will lead to enough knowledge to make a strong urban plan/design/strategy for my location.

**Research approach**

But before I could answer the main research question and make an urban plan I had define five sub-research question that needed to be answered in the next following half year:

**SUB-RQ1:** Why do cities need to be better integrated into a green-blue system to create a better liveability for them and the region? (Intended approach: literature study, writing position paper)

**SUB-RQ2:** What spatial configurations are used in cities comparable to Gouda to integrate them into a green-blue system? (Intended approach: case study)

**SUB-RQ3:** In which manner is Gouda currently integrated into the green-blue system of the Randstad and how did this situation form? (Intended approach: mapping/analytical drawings, observation)

**SUB-RQ4:** What urban strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats can be found in Gouda and other relevant scales that help/hinder the city to be better integrated into the green-blue system? (Intended approach: mapping/analytical drawings, observation)

**SUB-RQ5:** Who are involved into creating a new spatial configuration that allows Gouda to be better integrated into the green-blue system of the metropolitan region and what are their wishes? (Intended approach: literature study)

A more detailed explanation of the research methods per sub-research question and how they are interlinked can be found in the P2 report ‘thesis plan’.

**Observation now**

Later on I realized that the topic of ‘green-blue systems’ was far too much fixated and for a more complete urban plan I had to investigate more spatial systems. This resulted into that I needed to find something to melt the ideas of the green-blue systems with that of the more general spatial theories, and it helped.

Other than that the sub-research questions were still a great help during the last half year of my graduation project. The some of my chapters are still indirectly linked to the questions. Although I have to admit that not every sub-question is used in the end-result. Questions like “What spatial configurations are used in cities comparable to Gouda to integrate them into a green-blue system?” and “Who are involved into creating a new spatial configuration that allows Gouda to be better integrated into the green-blue system of the metropolitan region and what are their wishes?” are not properly treated. This is mostly due time issues and they felt less necessary than the other questions. Yet, I think that if I had answered these questions more completely my final result would have been stronger.

**RELATIONSHIP RESEARCH & DESIGN**

At the start of my graduation project I intended to make an urban plan through design-driven research, but later on this changed and the ‘research’-chunk became a larger part of my project. It became more and more a research-driven design. I did not really do this on purpose, but I also do not think this has bad results on the final product: a strong and complete research can really help making a good urban design. Most elements in my final design are also strongly linked with conclusions of my research.
**RELEVANCE OF MY GRADUATION PROJECT**

There is much academic discussion going on in how to search for a balance between urbanity and open space. It is very important for the people to have accessible connections from where they live to their surroundings and it is getting more relevant that cities need to profile themselves in the aspects they are unique in and have a better interrelationship with the metropolitan region they are located in. In the end I think my project can contribute to the social and academic ideas about this issue. Gouda was a case study, but the results and ideas could also be used for other cities in the Netherlands. Gouda is not the only city that is very introverted, many neighbourhoods/cites in the Randstad from the same time period look exactly the same and affect the metropolitan region in some aspects in a negative way: like segregation and decreasing liveability. Many residential and working areas in peripheral areas which are very hard to reach other than car. The outcome of this project can add up to the discussion in how to deal with these kind of urban areas and what the benefits could be for the metropolitan region as a whole and the cities themselves if you modify them.

**CONCLUSION**

I was for me doing this graduation project was very interesting and informative. I have no regret picking this topic and location. In the end I did not always follow the methodology I made during P2 that strictly. But that is part of the progress I think and an approach needs to be flexible and there needs to be room for redefining the questions. In the end I also think that my urban design is strongly linked with my research.