REFLECTION

T.SMIT_4018494_ExploreLab
Graduation Reflection

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Topic_ The role of the architect within projects of Collective Private Commission in the Netherlands
**Relationship between the project and the wider social context**

Within Dutch society we see the gradual decrease of governmental care and an increase of a ‘do-it-yourself-mentality’. The Dutch housing market is however still mainly providing housing and citizens are used to houses as ‘ready-for-use’ product. However, the financial crisis has shut down the most of the building industry. Parallel to this, some citizens question the desirability of the houses that are provided through the market. The affordability for middle-income classes and the option to design your house yourself makes CPC fitting in these new trends.

The realization of a caring community, the time they have left when retired and the possibility to avoid living in a nursing home makes these kind of projects especially attractive for people around 55+ who are still fit.

The idea of communal housing relates back to the 70’s and ‘80’s in the Netherlands, a time in which architects have done interesting architectural experiments. Collective private commission in the Netherlands however has even earlier roots, namely in the rising of housing corporations, which were erected to build dwellings of better quality for the working class in the end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth century.

Architects have been discussing what influence this development method has on the architecture of these dwellings, which is for example shown in the DASH-magazine on CPC. However, not a lot of research is done on the exact role of the architect in these types of projects, especially in the contact with future residents during the design.

A lot of these CPC-projects aim at realizing ecological (or sustainable) dwellings and they are also seen by current researchers as a promising trend to realize sustainable and resilient cities. Within this debate, this research and design analyses the possibilities of realizing sustainability through CPC.

To summarize, this research is relevant because it does specific research which has not yet been done (namely the role of the architect) of a growing building practice (CPC). Hereby it places this role of the architect and the wider trend of citizen participation in its larger social and historical context and investigates a the promising aspect of sustainability of this method.

The design is an unique experiment in this which enables the student to show how participatory processes influence the design of an architectural project. Besides this it investigates the architectural impact of designing for a community.

**Summary of the approach**

Very simply said, collective private commission is a group of citizens who develop their houses together and sometimes the public space around their dwellings as well. For architects, having a group of citizens as a client instead of a developer can be an enormous challenge.

For this graduation project, I formulated the problem that Collective Private
Commission is an growing building trend in society, but lack of research and experience makes it hard for architects to develop a clear vision on how to involve residents in their design process.

To tackle this problem my aim was to write a critical reflection on the role of the architect within CPC-process through the publication of a research report and to simulate a CPC-process in which the I experiment with the participation of future residents in my design.

Between p1 and p2 I realized there are two additional issues at hand which I chose to add to this graduation project. The first is that the communal spaces in these projects are one of the most unique qualities about these projects and architecturally very interesting. Secondly, that CPC is especially interesting for 55+ in a society where good care for elderly is no longer a matter of course. For my building design I therefore aimed beside the simulation of a CPC-project, to make (part of) the target group for 55+ residents who can live there for the rest of their life span (elderly dwelling) and to add communal functions to the design project. Later I added other target groups for which there is a shortage of suitable dwellings in the market: starters (small dwellings, sold and rent).

I formulated as my main question:
What is the role of the architect in projects developed through Collective Private Commission in the Netherlands?

To answer this question I interviewed architects and did literature study to write my research report. This research, a course on creative sessions and literature study on participation helped me design a workshop to involve residents in my design. The outcomes of this workshop I translated to additional starting points (to the ones that came from the location analysis). These starting points I used for my design. This concise summary, as well as the graphic representation in fig.1, shows how my research and design are connected.
How did this approach work?
I did start with a very broad investigation of Collective Private Commission, because I did not know a lot about the topic. The interviews were therefore also quite broad. This worked quite well, because by doing the research I could shape an image in my mind how a design process goes for a CPC-project. The interviews with architects were important aspects herein, because they told me very specific about what their role was. Schemes to explain different design themes helped me in this, see fig. 2. The literature information I used helped me to critically reflect on these ‘experiences in practice’ and vice versa. It was however really hard to start with the design. I made an location analysis, but deciding on the program of requirements was really hard without an idea about the wishes of the people that were going to live there, especially for the communal spaces.
It was also hard to find information about the workshop design. In the end I researched two ways in which a workshop could be organized. The course of creative facilitation (by Marc Tassoul) really helped to practice in organizing a workshop. It worked really good that I had decided to organize the workshop, because it forced me to make the conclusions of the research clear, to be able to reflect on them.
By using a very visible and easy-to-discuss method for the workshop I was able to generate clear starting points for the design. I could however not visualize or
articulate an even more important knowledge: I had formed myself an image of the
group I was designing for, the way they made decisions, the kind of people I was
dealing with and their priorities. This ‘layer’ underlying the outcomes of the
workshop helped me enormously in making decisions in my design phase. I tried to
design on what was essential for this group, instead of executing exact wishes.
The building design is quite different from other design projects, because of the
knowledge about the community that I had. The architecture in the project should
stimulate people to live together in this close community, by giving them enough
private space in their individual dwellings to retreat to and invitations to the public
spaces to make it feel natural to connect to those around them. Flexibility and a
strong architecture go hand in hand to give these people the chance to influence
their dwelling project.
Designing the project made me realize how enormous important the role of the
architect still is in these projects. He or she is the one to stimulate these people to
make the best out of their money by proposing a clear direction and help them stick
to the essentials of their wishes.

Realizing my goals
I can say that in the end the approach worked: Through researching this topic
broadly, executing this research in a workshop and after this designing for this
group of people I really gained a vision on the role of the architect in collective
private commission projects.
Looking back on the project I reflect on my working method. If I had narrowed down
the research some more instead of making it this broad, I might have come to some
more critical notions about the role of the architect. The aim to pay specific attention
to the design of the communal spaces was a good choice, because it was really
interesting to get input on this in my workshop and these spaces (and the important
transition between public and private) really made my architectural project unique.
from a normal project. It is easy to lose this focus during design and go too much into detail. The upcoming p4 period helped me to gain this focus back again.

Did I really simulate a CPC-process? Yes, I did, but only for a really small bit of the design process, on only one topic, see fig. 3. What I actually did during the design was using one moment of gathering information to create a design. Normally there would have been a whole process between me as an architect and the CPC-group before and after this one moment. But in my opinion, I did simulate this one moment in a realistic way and the design follows in this realism.

**Relationship to Explorelab (Theme and Methodology)**

Explorelab offered me as student the freedom to choose my own theme. I used this freedom to let this theme guide the methodology of the project, the content and set-up of the research and the location and object of design. The fantastic thing about explorelab is the possibility to go `outside the box` for the complete set-up of the graduation. By doing this, the student relates to the normal method of projects at this faculty. The interviews with architect made that I had to visualize the creative design process, while the addition of a workshop in the setup made it necessary to name the design decisions I had made and still had to make in the process. From these overviews I could name the differences between normal design processes and CPC and decide how to change my design method.
Position of my architecture within the Dutch context

*Urban Block* - As described in ‘New Open Space in Housing Ensembles’ by Delft Architectural Studies on Housing, there is a growing trend in Dutch architecture of opening the urban block to public functions. (see fig. 4)

![Diagram showing the development of the design unit](image)

Fig. 4 Overview of block development
Source: DASH, no.1, New Open Space in Housing Ensembles, p.8.

Dash describes the debate regarding this new open space. I mention some opinions with regards to my project. The development of uniform public space towards differentiation of this space, as described by Solà-Morales. Open space that is indeed accessible to the public, but clearly forms the domain of a specific group, as described by Reijndorp and Hajer. The transition towards living in a network society, which incorporates a shifting towards the inner domain of dwelling blocks, as described by Ivan Nio. De Cauter writes in this context about a society of fear and seclusion. (DASH, no1, p. 7-9)

In the design of this project, the urban block is opened for the public, but with small or blocked entrances. So, like the reference projects described in Dash, there is a tension between the public accessibility and the claim of the residents. Deliberately, entrances are places inside and outside the urban block, to keep both sides lively and to prevent the forming of a ‘gated community’.

*Communal spaces and garden* – The communal spaces and the garden have more priority in project that in many other CPC-projects, where the individual dwelling is much more important. Their central place in the project places the community at the heart of CPC, which is a statement against the idea that CPC is only a compromise so that building becomes affordable for people with an average income. Through the communal aspect it offers more than individual building.

Most CPC-projects which incorporate row-housing will go back to the traditional
‘private Dutch garden’, while I deliberately
gave the dwellings a small semi-private outside space (more a front garden) and a
private roof terrace/balcony. Quite unique in the Dutch context is the shared garden
as a transition to this front garden and the communal area. These ‘steps’ creates a
gradual transition from public to private, while preventing high hedges which
disconnect the dwelling from the garden.

**Facade**- There is a particular tension in CPC that repetition is cheaper, but every
individual has his or her preferences. During a debate on CPC, Marc Koehler
described the façade of his Loft Houses as ‘neutral’ to prevent discussion between
the residents. The grid of the façade is so strong, that individual infill of the
residents is non-descriptive. For their project in Boddegat, Ede, of individual
dwellings, FARO architects developed a façade variation so every resident could
compose his own façade. Because of my focus on small clusters for different target
groups, I have created repetition on small scale. When we look at only one dwelling
block, the façade is of the project not distinguishable as being CPC. However, as we
look at the whole building block, it differs enormously from normal built practice,
because there repeat the same dwellings on a much larger scale instead of such
small blocks. Besides this I have included for some dwellings the possibility of
building an extension, so the façade will start to differ over time.
The unconventional use of materials for some CPC-projects, for example for ‘Zonnespreng’, where the material gives the building more a French than a Dutch appearance, made me realize the connection to the cultural context of the project. The façade on the outside of the block is therefore deliberately made with bricks which fit in the context. Where the façade lies opposite to the existing main building of the terrain, it refers in composition to this building. The wooden façade on the inside of the building block mark the inside area as a distinctive place and connects the building blocks to each other.

*Floor plans*- In his lofthouses, Marc Koehler makes maximum choice possible within a fixed ‘3D-box of space’. Therefore every floor plan will be unique. After experimenting with empty space, I decided in my project to follow the approach of Herzberger in his diagoonwoningen in Delft, namely to create strong architecture which invites the resident to adjust his dwelling. Contrary to the approach of Koehler, this approach is more focused on adjusting the dwelling for its use after it is built. The first logical reason for this choice is a limited involvement of residents in my project. The second is that is was a good experiment with seeing dwelling as a process instead of finished when the house is built.

*Fig 9 Herman Herzberger  
Section Diagoonwoningen, Delft*

*Involvement of other actors and role of municipality*- This project focusses on what residents can reach without corporation of the municipality, which was especially important in the choice of scale of sustainable installations. But, the municipalities will have to realize what CPC is and how to attend to matters regarding CPC, such as selling of the ground.

What is an enormous potential in CPC is that trough eliminating several actors, such as the developer, the architect gets back in direct contact with the end-user again. By adding rent dwellings, however, I have added an actor which is necessary for realizing them: a housing corporation.
To summarize – my project relates to the development of opening the Dutch urban block for public functions. It counters the transition of public to private by creating in-between-scales, but avoids placing private gardens in the inner area. The facades are repetitive on the small scale, in the scale of the block they alternate because of the different target groups. They refer to the context and on the inside of the blocks connect them to each other. Also I expect variation will be built in over time. Much thought is given to the floor plans of the split-level dwellings, where strong architecture creates possibilities for the users own infill. A housing corporation and some goodwill of the municipality is needed in the development process.

Personal experience
Graduating at Explorelab was really intense. I learned so much about my fascination(s), but it was not always easy. As happens to many students, it was difficult to finish research (and the workshop) and start with the design in time. In my opinion it is sometimes quite strange Explorelab expects quite an extensive research, but in the end there is expected from the student a level of design as far elaborated as is expected at some other graduation labs.

Because of the freedom of topic it should be made easier to follow one’s own instincts regarding final products. It is really strange that the ‘list of required products’, which was so important the first bachelor years and disappeared during the last bachelor project and the master, suddenly comes back. As if the student all of a sudden cannot take the responsibility anymore to judge which products suit his or hers design best. I understand and assent to the opinion that an ‘architectural form’ should be made at the end of the master, the student studies Architecture after all. But more freedom to explore other correlated topics than Architecture and Building Technology could be allowed in a time the profession of the architect is becoming broader again.

Actually, I noticed I was also often busy with the ‘visible’ and ‘concrete’ side of the project, because that felt familiar, I had learned that during my education. I had to challenge myself to dive further into the less tangible aspects of social processes, and that was not always easy. But what I learned during graduation was very valuable and a basis for learning further about the relation between design and social processes.

Really nice was the willingness of other professors to plan a meeting and discuss my plan when I approached them. It is an great opportunity graduation offers to find your own experts in your subject. It would be nice if it was somewhat easier to discover how to find the right person for a topic, the website of the TUD does not make that any easier. Tracks are really separated and also for employees of the faculty it is not easy to find each other.

Regarding that last point I was surprised how hard it was to find experts on the ‘social side’ of architecture, or in my case, the focus on participation in the design
process. In my opinion a subject which does not get the attention it deserves at our Architecture track. Of specific interest, also seen in the light of improving design education, would be further research into the creative design process, supplementary on Elise van Dooren's research¹.

I loved to make the effort to specialize in sustainability and attain my annotation 'Technology in Sustainable Development' (TiSD/TiDO). The obligatory boatweek was very interesting, because of the discussions with students with the same interest in sustainability. Following extra courses gave me a great chance to broaden my knowledge about many aspects of sustainability.

To be honest, the organization of TiSD was for me equivalent to chaos. It is fine to have a system where the student is responsible himself for meeting the criteria, but then the sources of information should be correct. The website was however constantly outdated regarding courses, responsible referents and contact persons for the boatweek. It was unclear how the ECTS-system worked. It was unclear how the referent system worked for my mastertrack, as there is apparently no one who works at the architecture track who feels responsible for TiSD as far as I could discover. It is strange to make the amount of ECTS 10 points, while almost all courses are 3 ECTS (so I had to follow 12 ECTS). I think it would be a lot easier if there was at least a list somewhere of students who try to obtain TiSD. And I suggest a more transparent system about who is responsible for TiSD and to whom students can ask questions.

Now we have reached the end. It seems I have survived the emotional rollercoaster called 'Graduation'. Not all mentors realize how heavy this process can be for a student and I am thankful for the support my mentors gave me by giving honest feedback while also staying positive about my work. I think it would be wise for the faculty to reduce the stress of some moments (P4, P5) to some extent. The reflection is a great tool to use as feedback on how the graduation is experienced by students.

Looking back I am proud and grateful. I have always had a lot of interests and the relation between architecture and other professions often intrigued me. Besides this I developed early in my studies an interest for sustainability. The way in which this graduation project made it possible to expand my horizon further, integrate the social aspects of sustainable architectural design and gave me freedom to design my method makes me grateful. I know I will look back proudly on all I have accomplished and I am thankful for the faculty and my mentors for this process.