Reflection
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Faculty: Architecture and the Built Environment
Department: Management in the Built Environment
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Research: Organisational structures of the Corporate Real Estate (CRE) department
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REFLECTION

1.1 Research relevance

At the start of the graduation research process, it was stated that the aim of the research was to:

a) contribute to the field of knowledge concerning the configuration of CRE departments and by this,
b) contribute to the decision-making processes of firms regarding this configuration, by c) the recording and analysis of the organisational structures of CRE departments of five multinationals in the period since the turn of the century to now.

In essence, the research aimed to serve both a scientific as well as a practical purpose. Considering the former, I indeed consider the performed research to form a qualitative first step towards the development of more knowledge concerning the configuration of the CRE department. At the moment, the amount of knowledge concerning this subject at our department Management in the Built Environment of the TU Delft is limited. Although more business-like subjects such as organisational strategy are indeed handled in our curriculum, others such as the design of an organisation are not incorporated within the educational programme. Striking when you realise that a part of our graduates will eventually end up working as a leading manager in a CRE organisation. Therefore, possibly, the master thesis and the PhD thesis of Peter Krumm, can serve as inspiration for the formulation and development of new teaching material into these subjects.

Also on a global level, the amount of knowledge concerning the design of the CRE department is indeed limited. Naturally, many of the generic organisational theories can also be applied to the CRE department, but the actual application into the discipline can differ slightly in practice due to its particular values and constraints: more specialised knowledge is needed. Although I am not under the assumption that the performed research will contribute on a global level, I hope it will stimulate other students –at our department in particular- to conduct similar researches. Together, this can sum up into a valuable contribution to the scientific field of knowledge concerning the configuration of the CRE department.

Talking about the practical relevance of the research, I consider this to be quite limited. In order to execute the research in a qualitative and concise manner within the given limited timeframe, the scope of the research had to be limited strongly. This resulted in the fact that the conducted research merely answers the ‘how’ question: how are CRE departments configured, whereas the ‘why’ question is more interesting for actual CRE professionals. Naturally, they can use the thesis to compare their acting with that of their ‘competitors’. However, also then, the ‘why’ factor remains very important. As it was often stated within the thesis, a CRE department should adjust to its particular situation and not just one-on-one copy others. For this, a deliberate consideration of ‘why’ competitors do what they do, how they configure as they do, is important.

However, if this thesis indeed stimulates future graduate students to take up similar subjects, I believe that at some point, this ‘why’ question can indeed be answered and maybe even lead to a framework covering which configuration is most suitable for which situation. A product which is very valuable for CRE professionals. Again, I consider the performed research a positive step forwards.
1.2 Research method

For the research, use was made of qualitative research methods. Prior to the actual performance of the research, it was considered to supplement the qualitative research techniques with the conduction of quantitative questionnaires amongst more CRE professionals of every firm. Eventually, it was decided to no longer conduct these as it increased the already evident time pressure of the research and their contribution to the research was questionable. Afterwards, I indeed consider these as requiring more input than they would deliver output. Eventually, it turned out that archival review and qualitative interviewing have brought in enough and qualitative input for the writing of the elaborate case descriptions and therefore, it can be concluded that these were indeed supportive to the performed research.

The use of qualitative research methods also has some downsides however. First of all, the interpretation of data, in this case the archival documents and interviews, is very dependent on the interpretation of the researcher, thus me. Although this issue can never be overcome entirely, some attempts were made to limit the influence of the researcher. First of all, a complete overview of the used archival documents was provided in thesis as well as relevant references in every sentence or paragraph. Secondly, the results of the interviews are not only used to fill-in the Analysis Framework for every case firm, but the entire development of the case firms’ CRE departments is explained in the thesis. This makes the CRE departments’ story interpretable by the reader himself instead of the researcher only. Additionally, I have aimed to evaluate the dimensions of the CRE departments in relation to the Analysis Framework in an as objective manner as possible. An example hereof is the evaluation of the dimension of ‘evolution’ (Joroff, Louargand, Lambert, & Becker, 1993) of the CRE departments. This is a very subjective aspect but by strictly keeping in mind the descriptions of every stage by the author (despite my opinion that this description was not always fitting in practise), and by not considering the opinions of the firms’ CRE professionals for this, I aimed to execute this in the most objective manner possible.

The case study formed the major part of the research. I consider these to have been performed in a precise and consistent manner. However, only research five of the eight case firms as researched by Krumm (1999) were handled. I think it would have been very valuable to research all eight, but again due to the limited time frame and poor communication with the firms, it was decided to limit the case study to eight. Furthermore, it should be noted that the case studies and thus the case descriptions sometimes contain a slight one-sided perspective on events. These mostly origin from annual reports of the firms themselves and additionally, only one person within every firm was interviewed. Although I tried to filter prejudices, self-promotion and propaganda out of the case descriptions as much as possible, these probably are somewhat coloured anyway.

As a result of the performed literature review, an Analysis Framework was developed which was used for analysis of the case studies. Although this tool showed to be a guiding light as it helped me structure the rest of the research and more importantly, define its scope, it also expresses a limitation of the research. The framework was developed by myself and thus has no real scientific relevance. It should be noted that by this guiding and structuring, the Analysis Framework also led to parts of the CRE departments’ configuration to be less addressed.

1.3 Research process

In general, the research process went along as planned. The planning as substituted upfront was almost always followed and the deadlines formed by assessment moments were satisfied. The confirmation of the case descriptions by the case firms and the acquiring of additional data by this, formed the biggest hardship however and was not completed as planned, namely before the P3 moment. This was merely due to
difficulties in establishing contact with the CRE professionals, which are all very hard working and thus busy people. Fortunately, their initial interviews were all planned way up front (about two months) and were therefore all conducted timely. Due to this, I was running ahead of schedule for a long period of the graduation research and therefore, I could easily compensate for the time loss later, as the result of the communication difficulties. More problems arose in establishing the scope of the project. The chosen subject is very broad and therefore, a limitation of the research was needed. Finding these boundaries was sometimes difficult by fortunately, the by myself developed Analysis Framework helped me in finding structure in the ‘big mess’ of information awaiting me.

Considering my personal graduation process, I consider myself to have worked in a critical, concise and independent manner. My mentors have guided me very well and knowledgeable but I remain to consider the end products as being independently developed. Furthermore, I enjoyed the discussions held with my mentors and am very glad to have tasted some of the abstract thinking in which they are very well-trained. I also am aware however, that I still have much to learn in this compartment.

1.4 Research product
As a result of the graduation process, a master thesis was delivered which consists of a literature review, a developed Analysis Framework and extensive descriptions of the development processes of five case firms’ CRE departments. This is supplemented with an analysis and cross-analysis of those same cases.

The end product is a qualitative, in-depth product which I believe can especially contribute to the future graduation work of students exploring similar subjects but naturally, also to the work of others. Furthermore, the Analysis Framework, after validation and reassessment of the model, could be a good starting point for future organisational analyses.

Prior to the graduation process, the desire existed to eventually constitute the findings of the (then undetermined) research into a framework which would support firms in their organisational decisions concerning the configuration of the CRE department. Due to the limited time frame and broad scope of the research, this idea did not show viable however. Naturally, this is somewhat disappointing. However, I do not regret the then made decision to not chase this goal as I believe that by making this decision, the quality of the work which was delivered, was improved.

1.5 Personal study targets
Before the start of the graduation laboratory, I had set myself up with three personal study goals: self-development in the terms of planning and creating motivation for working, the broadening of knowledge and the delivery of high quality work.

Regarding the planning of the graduation, I consider myself to have done a good job. Naturally, the periods near the P2 and the P4 assessments moment required some additional effort, but I consider this to be more the result of a desire to read more and do more, than a result of bad planning. Also, the fact that possible interviewees asked me if coming along next month for the interview would be ok, which was in fact two months ahead of schedule, showed me that I at least started early enough with the contacting of case firms. Also, the several meetings with tutors and assessment meetings were planned way-ahead and were well-prepared. The creation of motivation turned out to be more of a hardship. During the graduation process, I found out I am more of an afternoon person than I am a morning person and therefore I prefer to fill in my days from 10:00 to 19:00 than from 9:00 to 18:00. However, I did establish to build up sort of
a rhythm as the process continued. Moreover, I experienced some motivational issues during the period of data collection. Due to the continuous repeating of processes, I lost my motivation to continue the process. Performing such activities for the first, second or maybe third case was fine, but by the time I arrived at the fourth case, I simply lost interest. The continuous support of my tutors helped me to conquer these issues as well as the taking on of some additional hobbies in my free time.

The in-depth research into the subject of organisational structures turned out to be an exciting and educational experience. I read and learned a lot of aspects falling out of my regular spectrum of educational programme and feel more comfortable in the subject. Unfortunately, I do not yet dare to call myself an expert in the field of knowledge though: it is very broad and there is much more to learn. Therefore, I aim to continue my work in the field of this subject in my next experience, that of my first job.

Concerning the delivery of high-quality work, I must note that the thesis is not yet assessed by my tutors and therefore, not a lot can be stated upon this point. Yet, I personally feel quite satisfied with the end result and I am convinced that I delivered qualitative work. Naturally, I would have wanted to explore more aspects and more cases, but I additionally believe that a good graduation process also depends on how well you can limit yourself to a given timeframe.