1. Introduction

For the last year I have been working on a design for a living environment for elderly with severe dementia, combined with a kindergarten. The design location is situated in the district 'het Oude Westen' in Rotterdam, at the crossing of the Nieuwe Binnenweg and the Mathenesserlaan. The main focus of the project is to show possibilities for a living environment in which the well-being of the dementia patient can be improved compared to traditional nursing homes. The experience of the interior and its relation to the exterior therefore plays an essential role.

In this reflection report a closer look will be taken on the results of the research and design in the graduation project in terms of product, process and planning. The aim of this reflection is to get a more thorough understanding on the design approach: its effectiveness and also what can be learned from it. Four aspects will be more elaborated:

1. the relation between the project and the wider social context
2. the relation between the theme of the graduation lab and the chosen subject
3. the relation between the methodological line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student
4. the relation between research and design

2. Relation between the project and the wider social context

Recent developments of budget cuts in elderly healthcare by the central government have had a lot of attention in the Dutch media lately. This currently results in closure of many nursing homes, forcing many elderly to continue living independently. This situation is not very desirable, since many of these elderly are in an almost constant need of help. Their safety and health could be neglected, which is especially the case for elderly with dementia.

At first sight it would not seem to make sense to design a new nursing home in these times. On the other hand, the recent developments do make it possible and necessary to reflect more critically on how we take care of the elderly population in the Netherlands. Current nursing homes are often very large scale and institutional buildings. They function as independent objects, whether they are built within the city or in the outskirts. This results in very little interaction with their environment, which makes them much less sustainable in my opinion. This interaction is in my opinion quite essential for both inhabitant of the nursing home and visitors.

My answer regarding these observations is to do slightly the opposite: since the beginning of the project the goal has been to design a living environment which is as non-institutional as possible. I have been striving for a domestic atmosphere, which is important especially for dementia patients. As their disease progresses, they become much less aware of who they are, where they are etcetera. Architecture can play a role in supporting the patient's consciousness, reducing stress levels and improving the well-being of the patient.
This has resulted in a small-scale living environment which has been weaved into the existing urban fabric very carefully. The building becomes almost unnoticeable when seen from the street, referring to the Dutch principle of the ‘hofjes’. A kindergarten has been integrated within the complex since I believe that both programs can be very beneficial for both user-groups by having as much interaction with each other as possible.

3. Relation between the theme of the graduation lab and the chosen subject

Nursing homes for elderly nowadays are not places where people are looking forward to be living in when they cannot live on their own anymore. A strong threshold exists between living at home and living in a nursing home, partially due to the considerably worse living conditions in nursing homes in the present situation. This became very evident during my interviews that I did with people who are dealing with dementia on daily basis.

The main theme of the graduation lab was to design a non-hospitalized health care institute. Important themes are the relation between interior and exterior, and also the role of the garden in the well-being of the patient. I saw this as an opportunity to design a living environment which tries to de-institutionalize as much as possible. Since nursing homes are often very isolated objects in the city, contributing to their institutional image, I chose a location which is right in the middle of center. Careful integration within the urban fabric is almost an obligation on this site, considering the qualities and values of existing buildings.

Ever since the beginning of the project I have been very fascinated with creating several gardens and courtyards in the design. These gardens become the backbone of the project, creating not only spaces for activity, but they also play a very important role within the spatial organization of the building which is essential for the dementia patient. The actual elaboration of these gardens and courtyards however, has almost always been on the surface and slightly superficial. Even though I did have ideas on how these gardens could look like, designing them more in detail has only been subject in the last few weeks before the P4. I believe that this is mostly due to my lack of knowledge on landscape architecture and gardening. Having some experience on these fields would make it much easier to see possibilities for both the garden and the architecture.

4. Relation between the methodological line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student

The studio was organized in such a way that the students were free to choose their own user group and design location, within the theme of non-hospitalized health care. The chosen design location would involve existing structures which would have to be transformed or replaced. This also gave a lot of freedom in the workflow.

In the graduation plan I set up a list of research and design methods. This involved both user and design research, working with a variety of media. Some of these methods were formulated quite open, such as ‘defining qualities I want to achieve’. This left the choice open on how to actually investigate this. In addition to my own research, various assignments were given during the project. They gave a certain direction to the design process in aspects which helped making myself more conscious about what I am actually doing. These assignments dealt with a wide variety of themes and media, ranging from making a short movie on the user group to the design of a health-cafe in a 1 to 20 model. I believe that this made the design much richer in various aspects.

The assignment of making a short movie was very inspiring for me for example. For this movie we interviewed Erna van Lunteren, whose husband is suffering from severe dementia. By hearing their stories, it made me much more aware for who I was doing this graduation project.
5. Relation between research and design

During the project, research and design progressed simultaneously. In this way a much more fluid process could take place in which research influenced the design and vice versa. Findings from the research could be directly applied into the design, making it also possible to focus the research very precisely. Within the studio a wide range of themes have been researched, which fed the design process. During the first month of the studio, various analyses had been made to research possible design locations and possible patient groups. Later during the project additional analyses have been made, which were then relevant. When designing façades, we for example made an analysis on the façades of the existing buildings on and around the site. This was not only inspirational, but it also made it possible to embed the design better in its context.

Parallel to the architectural research, a research seminar was provided to conduct research on the chosen patient-group and which themes are relevant to take into account when making a design for this target group. By doing case-studies and interviews, I have attempted to understand what dementia is, what it means for the patient and how the patient's needs can be accommodated in a nursing home. The results of the research have been very inspiring and also necessary for me to be able to develop my design, especially in the beginning stages. I was not too familiar with my chosen user group, so it has been very a valuable experience to dive into their lives. Like this, I hope that I have been able to design a living environment in which it is pleasant to live, a place which feels as home.