P4 Reflection

A reflection on my graduation project and process

Cornelia. S. Louh – 4017196

Main mentor: Robert Nottrot
Building technology mentor: Hubert van der Meel
Research mentor: Michiel Smits
At the beginning of my graduation I set myself the goal to find out how to contribute to a better quality of life for slum residents in Douala (Cameroon) by means of small architectural interventions. What stands out most, for many visiting the neighborhood for the first time, might be the poor housing with lack of adequate sanitation, openly disposed garbage, polluted rivers or the narrow spaces between houses filled with garbage. In my opinion there were more to focus on in such a neighborhood than only the obvious shortcomings. What do residents think themselves of their neighborhood and what do they prioritize in terms of improvement? The research aimed to find out what people miss the most in terms of public spaces, activities (recreational, commercial, and cultural) or basic needs (drinking water, roads etc.) in their neighborhood. This should result in defining a design project (most probably of public use) that will truly contribute to a better quality of life for the slum dwellers of Bessengue.

A great part of the graduation project at Explore Lab is the research. Compared to other graduation studio’s, Explore Lab focusses more on the research part. The fact that you have to define yourself how to do research, which research methods to use was the first challenge for me. The most important thing to do was to define a clear framework of research. Which aspects of the neighborhood should be subject of research? Which methods would be most appropriate to find the needed information? How did others do research in similar situations and what could I learn from it? I have to admit that from the very beginning I already had in mind very clearly which methods I wanted to use. During the research process I kept optimizing and shaping the research approach in order to get more valuable and reliable results. The use of different research methods (interviews, surveys, observations, design play) made it possible to get a better understanding of residents needs and priorities and finally define an appropriate design brief.

This graduation project has been a very learning full time especially due to the research part. It was the first time for me to conduct a research on site and really be there in the neighborhood with local residents. Even though I was familiar with the country and the culture it was very exciting and intense to conduct interviews and surveys. During the research, I started to formulate design strategies already. The time spent in Douala in the neighborhood trigger my creativity already. Even though the research was still going on it was unavoidable to start designing. One of the intended research method (design play) didn’t work out as planned. Looking back, this research method was probably not clear enough for the residents to participate. Most of the respondents had no inspiration, neither to draw a sketch nor describe what they would like to see on particular sites. Those who were asked to choose from various possible solutions did not express clear preferences. All solutions were good as long as there would be a change of the current situation. In case this part of the research would be re-done, it is advisable to take more time to design the various design solutions to show to residents.

Looking back at the aim of the research at the beginning of my graduation and the results, I can state that the current design project is a clear translation of research conclusions. In fact the program of the design project is based on the priorities of residents as concluded in my research. This makes the design much stronger and reliable.
Even though this design project was based on a specific site research, I am very much convinced that the final proposal is applicable in different location and contexts.

The concept of the building offers a solution that in fact is not necessarily location-based. The roof of my design offers a solution for water collection, solar energy and at the same time it can house various types of activities underneath. This makes it suitable for other locations in other cities, neighborhoods and even other African countries (or in tropical climates).

The design has become a place where residents can meet and organize various activities. It’s a social project and it can be subject of debate if it has become a concept applicable in many more situations than originally intended. Therefor I think it is necessary to improve/ optimize aspects such as:

- standardization of construction elements
- better concept for re-use and treatment of rain water collected
- clear estimation of solar energy produced by the roof