reflection
at home in the city

‘infill vs sprawl’

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I began this project with the aim of realising suburbia in the urban setting of Amsterdam. Coming from a country where this had been the norm rather than the exception, I had an appreciation of this lifestyle but also had experienced the consequence of urban sprawl. Having lived now in Europe for two years I have come to appreciate walking to the supermarket and riding by bike to a friend’s house or nearby town where previously I would have driven half an hour in the same city to reach a friend’s house.

One of the most valuable things that I have learned while studying in Holland has been the strong presence of urbanism tied to architecture. Recently I listened to an audio recording given by a famous Australian novelist, Tim Winton at the London Academy. He spoke of the first time he left the world’s largest island and came into contact with Europe. He describes his perception of light and space and sense of human scale which was somewhat altered from that of a European due to the influence of the landscape. European spaces were far more humanized as opposed to the vast and dry Australian landscape.

“Australia the place is constantly overshadowed by Australia the national idea. Undoubtedly the nation and its projects have shaped my education and my prospects, but the degree to which geography, distance and weather have moulded my sensory palate, my imagination and expectations is substantial. Landscape has exerted a kind of force upon me that is every bit as geological as family.” (Winton, T. 2013. Royal Academy London).

At the beginning of this project I imagined in some way that these two worlds could be merged and the challenge would be to have this idyllic experience of ones own home and a garden felt in Amsterdam.

At the start of the design process I wasn’t fully aware of the scale of the site and the necessity of developing a masterplan. The overwhelming scale prolonged the design at the macro level and it took longer to delve down to the scale of the dwelling. The fact that architecture is inextricably linked to the surrounding urban condition made this a worthwhile step and strengthened the project overall. I think one of the most important things that I have gained from this dwelling project and from studying in The Netherlands has been to study the structure of the urban block in the city of Amsterdam and the quality and definition that small and closed urban spaces can give. Amsterdam founded on the urban perimeter block, forms defined urban spaces which
starkly contrast the open suburban style suburbs of my youth.

Throughout the project, one of the things that I have come to terms with has been the constant need to approach the architecture at different scales. After leaving behind the masterplan it was necessary to develop the dwelling module before returning to the scale of the block, back to the urban level and even down to the detail of the steel node structure (something that I wouldn’t have conceived of designing).

I learned to think about the detail and also to constantly zoom out and reflect on the implications at the larger scale. For example when I was designing the housing module, while it was important to think about this unit as a singular entity to develop the design, there were implications on how this could be integrated into the block. The orientation and placement of the modules on the block, such as how they could be interlocked and the stepped shape (L-shape) of the module needed to be placed at certain angles to alleviate areas where the sun would not be reached. The large depth of the module (16 metres) meant that the interlocking ability was limited. I tested an extreme interlocking structure of the modules, however the large depth of the module (16 metres) meant that at the inner square/portion there would be no sunlight except that which was coming through the lightwell. This affected how the dwellings could be placed side by side to ensure that all rooms (including bedrooms if they were placed in the centre) received light.

During the majority of the process i held onto the idea of densification as this formed one of my primary research questions. At some point however I let go of this idea to a degree as it seemed more important to find quality in the housing. This makes it difficult to measure an appropriate level of densification however the sharing of outdoor space, which has a long tradition of Europe in the form of courtyards and a low rise apartment typology proved effective. I diverged somewhat from the original idea of a shared living arrangement of which I wanted to test a new level of densification. Upon realising that it is hard to direct how a person should choose to live it became clear that it is more important that a structure remains flexible as it is not possible to predict in 50 or 100 years how a building will be used. Therefore the strength lies in developing an adaptable structure that can be converted from housing to offices, to commercial functions and thus maintains its longevity.
Some further studies may have been taken towards developing a more advanced climate system that is in line with energy neutral or energy plus buildings. The building technology really directs the form and orientation a building can take by catching sun. Upon making a decision such as whether the roof should be sloped or if the fenestrations open inwards or outwards had consequences on the use of technologies and solar gains (due to the positioning of blinds on the inside or outside and prevention of drafts and uncontrolled air exchange. Dwelling is such a intimate space that it seems most important to provide opportunities for manipulation at the level of the dwelling structure to grow and contract, customisation of space and manipulators located in the facade.

Looking back at my masters entrance application I realised that I had been occupied with the idea of urban sprawl from the beginning of my studies, which had escaped my mind at the onset of the dwelling project. Realising suburbia in the city environment however is almost impossible as the experience of open space and nature could never be replicated in an urban environment with such close proximity of buildings and people. While there will not be the same degree of privacy and sense of ecology the essence of community and neighbours if encouraged at the urban scale and if executed well could provoke this.