Evaluation of the graduation process

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For my graduation thesis I was looking for a topic in which I would feel I had a personal interest. Ever since I started studying architecture I wanted to focus on development projects. This is the reason why I decided to choose for Post Disaster Urban Redevelopment (PDUR). It was quite a long path before I came up with a clear choice for my topic in the field of PDUR. I had spoken to numerous professors and tutors about this specific topic and I found the complexity of it very interesting. I did realize that it was that complexity that has challenged my abilities in the past months but I responsibly and gladly accepted that challenge.

My personal interest lies with those vulnerable societies affected by disasters all over the world. In 2008 I visited South East India and saw with my own eyes the devastation that the Tsunami caused in the area. I undertook this graduation project as my chance to dig deeper to this topic, and make an effort to map issues and challenges and write a proposal about how to enhance more sustainable post disaster urban redevelopment outcomes in the future.

In a sense, the immediate post disaster redevelopment situation of my case study resembles the organization of my graduation process the last year. It was somewhat chaotic. Banda Aceh is a complicated place as I have described in my report. Additionally post disaster urban redevelopment (PDUR) is a complex matter, which requested me substantial time and effort to grips the concepts that compose it. In this evaluation of my graduation process, the following 3 aspects are going to be elaborated:

1) The relationship between the theme of the studio and the case study chosen by me.
2) The process chosen in the graduation
3) The reflection on the research framework and the wider social and academic context

1. The relationship of the studio to this research

The graduation studio of Urban Area Development (UAD) has as a departure point for our graduation, the understanding of the dynamics that impact the urban fabric. In a society that constantly changes and urban sprawl appears to become an understandable word, even for people that are not affiliated with the building environment, knowing and understanding the characteristics of urban area development has become apparent. It is known that the largest part of the world’s population lives in urban areas. The fact that urbanization comes with challenges provides ground for further investigation. As the aim of the studio is to understand and study the urban complexities, a post disaster context is part of that. The fact that natural disasters are increasing globally, as do their effects to the people, combined with the urbanization challenge, PDUR proves to be a topic that requests further investigation and continuous research. Although the context of a Post disaster area may differ from a non disaster area, their characteristics are comparable. As David Alexander said: PDUR situation are sufficiently frequent to be planned for…. Additionally both have intense collaboration mechanisms among their various stakeholders, various scale levels, functions and phases and of course various policies aiming to regulate them. Concluding both aim to make a contribution towards a sustainable future for the area that have been or is going to be subject of change. My research aims to provide a model that can help clarify the outcomes of community participation in a post disaster context. It investigates the levels of participation in the various scales and challenges that occur.
2. The process chosen in the graduation

As mentioned before, many concepts had to be thoroughly understood for this research. To name some: the dynamics of urban redevelopment and the correlation with post disaster urban redevelopment in general, community participation in post disaster context, building back better, strategies used, challenges that occur in PDUR and stakeholders interactions. The first few months were spend on becoming familiar with these issues. This was done in a sense that conflicted with the organization of the graduation process as it is. This was mainly because the student is required to define a problem statement and research question relatively early in the process. In my case I did not have all the parameters sufficiently clear at that moment resulting in an ill-defined problem statement, research question and research set-up. I can state that I had underestimated the complexity of the topic. Although I had a clear goal in my mind, I experience difficulties in narrowing down my scope. After a had a clearer idea of what my research topic would be, namely community participation in PDUR, I had to chose a method to investigate it. A case study research proved to be the most appropriate way.

Soon after I started preparing for a field visit in order to conduct semi-organized interviews and observe the results of the redevelopment actions in my case study myself. During the field visit, my networking skills worked in my benefit and I managed to find sufficient people to interview and talk to. I had divided them in stakeholder groups and had questioned them about the level of community participation in the different phases of the reconstruction process. Which proved to be sufficient since it provided me an inside in the PDUR process. Initially the idea was to understand the strategy used in Banda Aceh in the housing program, but it included various levels and scales and numerous stakeholders. I got often stuck in the information. There was no one single strategy used, but there were principles that had to be applied by all stakeholders in the long process to bring the city back to normalcy. The government had requested the affected people to be the central theme when formulating plans in Banda Aceh. The field visit and the data gathered there where ample and the scope of my research had been further defined. Upon return, I had accepted to work for 6 months in Greece on a prestigious project that I had co-initiated. This took me out of the graduation planning and although I had gained a lot from this experience my graduation suffered from that. I took me some time to re-evaluate my progress and once started the development of the thesis picked up speed. A lot of work still needed to be done, but the focus was clear. While interpreting the data and drawing preliminary conclusions I struggled for a long time to design a framework wherewith I could justify and test my findings. If that had existed earlier my research would have gone smother and perhaps the outcomes would have been even stronger. When the framework was finally designed, and since I already had everything in mind the process speeded up significantly. Focus was given on the parts that would support my findings and the suggested scheme came up quicky afterwards. I also manage to request 6 of the people that I had interviewed to fill in a stakeholder map that I had used and mention the challenges that occurred according to them in the different investigated phases. Those outcomes had not been crosschecked yet. After my presentation is completed I will control whether my findings correspond to the answers of the people that have fill in the form.

Concluding on the issue of the process chosen, looking back I think it would have been helpful if I had been less optimistic about the scale of my approach. If I had narrowed down my case study at an earlier stadium, considerable time wouldn’t be lost. Furthermore I underestimated the complexity of the topic and therefore needed substantial additional time to understand the concepts and the context better. Lastly clarity on planning and writing would have helped considerably, especially the designing of the framework. The lesson learned is to
work on the translation of my thoughts sharp into words. Herewith my intentions would become clearer and that will be beneficial for the outcomes.

3) The relationship between the project and the wider social context

The last reflection evaluates the research framework used in this study on academic and empirical applicability. As been advocated, the research frame was realized by connecting theory to practice. By using the theory on stakeholders analysis, the challenges that occur in PDUR, and the ladder or participation developed by Arnstein, a model was then designed. Herewith the different time moments in this research could be analyzed. The results were then used to advocate changes in the level of participation in that model. The model managed to align the ladder of participation with the different scales of the projects. The dominating theory of Arnstein (2007) was made operational by undergoing a chronological study of Banda Aceh.

As can be concluded by using this model in the Banda Aceh case study, the outcome has created a detailed understanding of the preferred levels of participation in the different levels. For the goals set in this study, it has proven to be tangible and applicable. It has to be said however, that this applicability relates to this particular case only. Now it is not to say that the institutional approach is not valuable, hence this would form a discrepancy with the outcomes of the study. However, it needs to be stressed that the theoretical concepts of community participation, the challenges that occur in PDUR and the understanding of the stakeholders role in PDUR, are imperative in post-disaster redevelopment. As has been seen, these three topics influence developments tremendously and it is the understanding and integration of those aspects that produces a proactive perspective beyond the conventional post-disaster paradigm.