Reflection report

1. Chosen theme and location
The theme for my design is a hospice building, an “almost-at-home” environment where people spend the last days or weeks of their lives. I chose this theme for its social relevance and the unique importance of the Hospice environment for its vulnerable inhabitants. For the location I chose a soon-to-be disused building in a neighbourhood of Utrecht built during the post-war reconstruction. The aim was to find ways of dealing with this type of environment which is generally perceived as very low quality and to imagine how we might re-use buildings from this time period.

2. Methodology
The initial approach was based on two relatively separate lines of research. The first of which would be a practical part consisting of a number of case studies, investigating how hospices support quality of life, through the analysis of existing hospices and interviews with caregivers. The second part was to be a more theoretical enquiry into ways of dealing with spirituality through the picturesque aesthetics of John Soane and his House Museum.

During the first phase of the research it became clear that the case studies, which I had envisioned as a way of quickly getting an overview of Hospice care, were in fact much more time consuming than I had imagined. It also became apparent that the caregivers I had interviewed were much more interested in the outcome of my case studies than I had anticipated, which gave this part of the research a new relevance. The second part of my research, which I still planned to do, was postponed until it became clear that the time left would not be sufficient to complete it. The choice to re-use an existing structure also proved very time consuming and imagining how the existing situation might be almost became a design in itself.

In the end I must conclude that the chosen strategy of two different lines of research, combined with the re-use of an existing structure was perhaps too ambitious. The final research product is based on 3 extensive case studies and recommendations for the design of Hospice buildings, which I hope will have some relevance for the hospices caregivers I met during my research, some of which are in fact planning new hospices.

It must be noted that the re-use of an existing structure with little perceived cultural value proved to be a very valuable asset to the project. In a way, the nature of the building is derived from its location. An interesting part of this is that the not all the drawings of the original building were available, leaving room for an informed re-imagining of the building and its strategies. These strategies were then applied again to the redevelopment of the building to capture the “spirit” of the place. There was a pragmatism to the original building that has been re-used, the logic of which did not lead to the a new pragmatic and cost effective building, but rather to a surprising and slightly estranging result.

3. The relationship between research and design
The research is in large part of a programmatic nature, and the resulting document can almost be read as a qualitative design brief for a hospice that supports the quality of life of its inhabitants in all its aspects. The most influential theme from the research that has found its way into the design is the concept of “connection”: connection to a place, a larger social context, everyday life and to the self to support quality of life. In my own design it has continuously been a check for my own design work. The most interesting part of the project has been the use of the existing location as a source of inspiration to deal with the different themes of “connection”.

4. Relationship of project to wider social context
The project proves its societal relevance in two distinct ways. Firstly it offers a perspective on the re-use of existing post-war reconstruction architecture which is generally perceived as low-quality.
Secondly it demonstrates a strategy for hospices to support the well-being of their inhabitants more fully, through giving an architectural expressing to the relevant quality of life aspects and especially “connection”. As a combination of the two aspects, the project might even be read as a strategy of using the existing low-quality urban environment and its characteristics to “connect” a hospice to its physical, societal and cultural context.