

Interiors Buildings Cities - Independent group

MSc4 graduation project reflection

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Pablo Picasso
Guitar player, 1910

'Who sees the human face correctly, the photographer, the mirror or the painter?'
Pablo Picasso

In my opinion, there is no such thing as objectivity. I think that within our culture we have made up that word so that we may pretend to be objective in order to communicate with one another. Rather everything is subjective. Subjective and relative: reality is different for everyone and it is perceptible to time as well.

Architecture then, holds an interesting place. A building conceived by an architect is a manifestation of his understanding of reality or of what it should be. This building is built and becomes part of the physical world. It can now be perceived by people other than the architect. It becomes part of their reality too. A 'good' building can take up this position well. It fits in many realities: people can understand it, use it and appreciate it. But how do we as architects achieve this?

This is a question which I find fascinating and daunting at the same time. How can I as an individual construct something that is meaningful and sensible to other people? When reflecting on the process of my graduation project, I discovered that this desire was present throughout. In this reflection I will therefore analyse how it has influenced my research and design.

The theory of the philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, as proposed in his book 'The production of space' in 1991, was helpful to me in helping me understand the world in which I operate. He explains the construction of our reality in a triad of spaces: the 'perceived space', the 'conceived space' and the 'lived space'. The perceived space can be understood as the physical space, the conceived space is a mental construct and an imagined space; and the lived space is that which is modified in everyday life¹. Accordingly he explains how this triad of spaces is intrinsically related: *'The schisms between subject's perceived and lived spaces of activity and 'objective' scientific-technological spatial structures is bridged by 'ideologies of space' [...] These ideologies articulate science with everyday life, render spatial practices coherent, guarantee the functioning of everyday life and prescribe modes of life.'*²

He established an understanding of space as produced in social practices that, in turn, appropriate space as their tool, medium, and milieu³. So space holds a certain common language within and we are both actors and products of that space.

Then in order to intervene as an architect in a specific space in a sensible way, it requires a close reading of that space. The intervention has to be somehow part of the existing code while at the same time also introducing something new, altering that space and its code just a little bit. As architect Alvaro Siza has often stated: *'Architects don't invent anything; they transform reality.'*

This notion has helped me understand my own position as an architect. Instead of imposing abstract ideas on physical fabric, I would like to think of architectural intervention as a response to a certain place at a certain time.

A fascination for the periphery and an interest in designing public buildings, formed the starting point for my graduation project. I wondered what a public institution would look like in the periphery. The location for my research became one close to home: the periphery of Rotterdam and in particular the city district Overschie. I followed no systematic approach for researching the area, instead I just spend a lot of time in Overschie. My approach to research tended therefore to be an emic one: studying from inside the system⁴. I made long walks through the area, I watched a football game at rvv Neptunes on a Sunday morning, I attended a half-yearly meeting of garden community VTV Blijdorp and I talked with people. In doing so, I learned how people used the place and what they thought of it.

Some of the observations during my time of research, started to become more important for my understanding of Overschie as a distinct place. One was that I saw Overschie as a fragmented area. Although it is one of the larger districts of Rotterdam, it doesn't have many residents. Instead it is characterized by its openness and high amount of nature in which various structures take place: an airport, a large new residential area, clusters of companies a remaining emergency village of the Second World War and parks. These structures don't have much correlation other than that they cannot find a place in the city-centre due to their size, low profit, unwantedness or because they were simply already there. In addition there is not a clear order distinguishable. New and old, large-scale and small-scale, company and dwelling are mixed together in a peculiar collage.

At the same time, however, I also observed a lot of social activity and a strong sense of community within some of these fragments. These buildings and structures have turned inward and have their own codes of conduct. I'm talking about longstanding neighbourhoods, sporting clubs, allotments associations and all other structures which have the ability of uniting people. Within the periphery these communities found some freedom. Finally, I apprehended traces of different stages of our Dutch man-made landscape. There is still a strong presence of the polder landscape in Overschie, visible in the dykes, wind mills and the many ditches. Next to it, are the new suburbs and company clusters of the rapidly expanding city. They are located on layers of sharp sand or are protected by the dykes. And somewhere in between these two stages are the garden communities, lightly cultivating the left-over land in Overschie.

But on the other hand, my understanding of Overschie was also influenced by things other than the physical place itself, but which were nonetheless linked to it.

Texts, maps and photographs allowed me to discuss my findings during tutorials, and by talking about it, my observations became ideas that no longer stood solely by themselves. They became part of other ideas too. What could the history of urbanization tell me about Overschie; how is our Dutch neo-liberalist environment reflected in it; and what role does the transformation of the Dutch landscape play? These were all frameworks in which I could place my initial observations and just like my wanderings through Overschie, they rendered new findings and altered my understanding of Overschie. The difference being that the first observations took place in the physical world and were very personal, while the latter are part of abstract constructs and are more widely supported.

Thus in a way I abstracted my findings, and in doing so, I was able to place it within the scientific or academic discourse. Especially placing Overschie in its historical, social and political context was important in further transforming my initial research into something that could become a graduation project. By researching the political system of Rotterdam, I learned of the introduction of a new organisational system in 2014, in which the fourteen sub-municipalities were replaced by fourteen district committees without legislative power. With the new organisational model there has been a transition towards a more central and policy minded way of governing districts. The agenda of the city is imposed upon the districts, while the agenda of the districts is not well accounted for in the city. The result is an increasing gap between city and district. In addition the last couple of years has seen a great decline of community centres in the Netherlands and also in Rotterdam as a result of the cutbacks of city administrations. As a consequence residents don't have a place where they can gather.

This consequently reinforced my idea that Overschie is a place that is controlled not from within, but from without. On one hand the central administration has a strong yet distanced influence on Overschie while on the other hand a lack of a represented unified district makes this possible. Its fragmented nature thus leads to further fragmentation. This is where I saw a possibility for an architectural intervention.

'There is no logic that can be superimposed on the city; people make it. and it is to them, not buildings. that we must fit our plans.' This is a part of the introduction of the article 'Downtown is for People' written by Jane Jacobs in 1958, in which she makes a case for a closer examination and appreciation of how people actually use downtown. I decided that my project should likewise be something that responds to how people actually use Overschie. Two things that seems to characterise Overschie, are the many communities and the continuous presence of green landscape. Each of these communities has a building of some sorts, which provides a place for gathering, identification and for organisation. To create some unification and self-sufficiency, I think that a similar building can work too on the

scale of the district. Furthermore, this building should become part of the landscape to truly become a connecting force. It has to become three things at once: 1. A means of political representation; 2. A central node for a social infrastructure; and 3. An instigator for local provision. The project that I therefore propose is a public space which can negotiate between the city and locality: a public institution in the periphery.

To come back to the question I asked in the beginning of this reflection: How can I as an individual construct something that is meaningful and sensible to other people? I think that, as with everything, it requires a fine balance. A balance between specificity and more abstract notions. While the first tailors a design for a specific place, the second makes it part of something bigger. Something that is meaningful to other people, needs both.

An architect will never be able to construct an exact manifestation of his ideas and ideologies nor will people other than the architect be able to understand and appreciate it perfectly. Some things will inevitably get lost in translation, but there is beauty in trying anyway.

1. Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
2. Stanek, L. (2011). *Henri Lefebvre on space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
3. Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
4. Lucas, R. (2015). *Research Methods for Architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing.