

Reflection

Physical Disabilities and Inclusive Living: Social Integration through Architectural and Urban spaces



Designing for Health & Care: Towards an Inclusive Living Environment

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REFLECTION

RELATION BETWEEN THE TOPICS OF PROJECT, STUDIO, TRACK AND MASTERS PROGRAM

My graduation topic looks closely at people with physical disabilities and their family members who has to provide them with care on a regular basis. I chose this target group due to the realization that these two groups face issues in their daily lives including social isolation because their living environments are not designed to facilitate their integration in society. What my graduation research aims to show is that it is possible to find solutions to both the social and physical barriers by adjusting and designing architectural and urban living environments suitable for the physically disabled people and their families to change the way they perceive their environments, their presence in the space and how others perceive their participation. Within the master track Architecture, it is key to find solutions to urgent and/or pressing problems within the society that is created through designed spaces and architectural features – which is in line with what my research aims to do. This graduation studio in specific is a very fitting place for this research topic because of its focus on human centric research and the overarching topic of inclusivity. By going on fieldwork and interacting with the target group as part of this graduation studio, problems around disabilities were observed and subsequently, better understood and designed for. MSc programme pays attention to academic side of the studies and this is also visible within this graduation project by having a complete research that starts with identifying the problem, forming a framework and then progresses with going on fieldwork to

look for answers and supporting the answers using literature study and other research methods. This academically-based research then forms the foundations for the design project which emerges partially from the interactions with the target group and also from the societal awareness the research provides. I believe my research does not only feed my design project, but also provide insight for architects and researchers on this topic of social integration of disabled adults and their families/caregivers and how it can be achieved through the design of architectural and urban living environments.

Additionally, this research made me realize how important our living environments are. By affecting who we encounter, what we see on a daily basis and the opportunities it provides and offers for various groups of people, our living environments really have the power to affect the way we live our daily lives, how we perceive others and our daily routines that shape so much of who we are. Through this realization, I quickly came to the conclusion that through our designed spaces, it is possible to help healthy individuals to get to know disabled adults which can increase awareness through exposure. The future of healthcare seems to be laying in this principle: the idea of “Sharing the Care“. By forming healthy communities where social bonds are created between individuals that live in the same building/neighbourhood, care can easily become a value that is shared - releasing the pressure, burden and shame on people with disabilities as well as their family members. Even though this sounds a very holistic view and a more societal issue rather than an architectural

one, I believe it is partially the designers task to shape our living environments to allow for such possibilities. This is what I have been aiming to achieve with my design project as well.

RELEVANCE ON THE LARGER SOCIAL, PROFESSIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORK

I believe as a future architect, it is essential for me to learn about different kinds of people and their needs and demands. Our societies are organized in such a way that living independently is almost impossible, especially for vulnerable groups. While dealing with such groups, it is especially important to listen to what they want from their living environments that they are spending majority of their times at, because they cannot leave their living environments as easily as the rest of the people in the society. Sometimes, what happens in practice is that architects overlook the people who will make use of the space. Or when it comes to physical disabilities, small interventions are done, such as addition of elevators or ramps. However, these are sometimes not enough to provide an inclusive experience for this target group. I believe my topic offers perspective for a large societal and architectural issue. My topic focuses on people with physical disabilities and their families/caregivers, who have to learn how to live their lives with their conditions. It is sometimes the case that architects and designers tend to overlook their conditions and needs. Although a lot of research has been done on physically disabled adults and their family caregivers, it turns out that the connection is missing between their experiences in the society and the field of architec-

ture & urban design. I hope to connect these two points, offer a new perspective for the people in the field and also apply what I have learnt in a complete design project.

REFLECTION ON THE RESEARCH AND DESIGN PROCESS

I look back at my research and design process with joy and pride. It has not only been challenging - getting in contact with strangers, trying to find common ground, empathizing with their needs and desires and to take lessons out of it - but also eye-opening in many ways. I have learnt to keep an open-mind while stepping into a research and/or design project: it might not always end with what I envisioned at the start or the process might not be as smooth as I planned but it is important to work through it at all times.

With my research taking more time than I planned initially, I was left with very little time to prepare a design proposal which translates everything I have found through my research in my design coherently. It took me some time to really locate myself in the site that I have chosen and really start working with what is already there and what to do to achieve my goals. By choosing an existing building, I really hopped on a challenge and spent many hours on just trying to understand the building itself which put me in a position where I felt lost and I found myself at a distance from my research findings and my initial goal with this design. I tried my best to keep my focus on my main goal and target group but looking back, I can see that it has not been so successful at points. By referring back to my

research booklet constantly, I hope that I have managed to stay on track and form a coherent story with my project.

An additional point to reflect to is my realization on the importance of Building Technology. By choosing an existing post-war building to transform for my project, I took on the responsibility to do more research and spending an additional time on understanding the structure, construction, what the building offers and what is actually possible. This process has made me more aware of the struggles that comes with working with an existing building to transform it but also how much of a puzzle it is. Through a building technology point of view, I had the opportunity to follow what the building offers rather than what I bluntly want to achieve. This offered a new perspective on the practice of architecture for me and I am glad that I have embarked on this challenging journey of transformation.