

# TAKE [A] PART



*Urban design of physical public spaces  
from a social perspective*

# P5 REFLECTION

## **1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (Ar, Ur, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?**

My graduation project sits between the social and urban sciences, focusing on the interrelation between the built environment and social behaviour. I wanted to understand the role of urban design in social phenomena (and vice versa), and how it affects people and society. Thus, in my research I have gathered insights and theories from the social sciences such as environmental psychology and social geography.

Typically, the education within the programme and the master tracks focusses on the spatial and more tangible aspects, and the objective of the teaching is providing students with the essential skills, theories and methods to proceed in the field. However, engineering does not happen in a vacuum, the success of our designs and visions in the end depend on people and the research that is done should in the end contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals. The objective of urbanism, in my opinion, is to positively contribute to a sustainable quality of life for all. This would require not only an understanding of the discipline, but also of the interrelation of the built environment and the people we design for. The difficulty lies in defining what is the responsibility of which discipline. To what extent should urbanists be concerned with the behaviour of people, or the impact of policies in the spatial dimension on the social dimension? This is what I wondered and wanted to understand better. The education that I enjoyed at the faculty provided me with the basis to broaden my perspective and to explore new territory. Instead of focusing on the spatial dimension, this time I explored the potential of urban design and the built environment from a social perspective.

The context of my research, urban regeneration in the Netherlands, is a typical urban planning and

design context. It requires thinking about not only the outcome of the process, but also the procedures and steps to get there. It is dependent on the governance context, something that is taught in the education of urbanism and the overall programme of the faculty.

Although my research relied heavily on a theoretical exploration, it provided me with a wealth of insights to translate the social objectives to tangible urban design objectives and interventions. However, in the development of the design interventions, the implementation in the governance context was considered as well. This relates to the strategic component of urbanism.

The combination of insights from practice, theory and the interdisciplinary approach is what sets the urbanism master programme apart from other programmes at (inter)national universities. It is what provided me with the necessary skills and insights to explore a new part of the discipline. In light of the Countours2030 ambitions of the TU Delft and overall developments in thinking about people and the environment, I believe that it is not strange to broaden the discipline of urbanism

## **2. How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?**

My graduation project relied heavily on (theoretical) research, which informed the design. This is a logical consequence of the research methodology. The operationalisation of a concept means that you take the concept apart and distinguish between the antecedents, the determinants, the indicators and related concepts. This does require a thorough understanding of the concept itself. As a consequence, I have read quite some literature

on not only the main topic, but also about concepts and theories that seemed to be relevant. The focus on the theoretical exploration made it more difficult to make the translation of the theoretical findings to the spatial dimension, which was the objective of my graduation project. By having such a broad and quite deep understanding of the concepts, it becomes very complex and I had difficulty translating this into simple schemes or actual design objectives. This showed to me the value of design, which provides another way of researching. It provided me with a different perspective and worked as a tool to specify the findings and to make them explicit. Through the development of the analytical framework and the design interventions, I was able to better understand my thought process and my understanding of the interrelation that I gathered from the theories. It helped me to understand why I researched certain aspects, to formulate the reasoning behind it and to decide what was relevant and what not. Thus, the design of interventions highlighted the aspects that I needed to research further, either from a spatial or social perspective.

### **3. How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?**

I think I took an engineering approach to a social issue, using the knowledge and skills I had to take apart an unfamiliar social concept. It is my opinion that, in order to formulate specific interventions that effectively address an issue from an engineering perspective, you need to thoroughly understand the problem that you are addressing so that you can find where the potential lies from your own discipline. That is why I explored the concept of social cohesion from different disciplines and dimensions (e.g. governance, health,

behaviour, society, design). Although it did make it far more complex, as everything seems to be related (and is), it forced me to be explicit in what I would address and what I would not consider in the design proposals or the framework. Furthermore, it helped me to understand the possibilities and limitations of my own discipline and skills, which I think contributed to more realistic expectations of urban design. Lastly, by exploring the concept from different perspectives but through the lens of urban design, I started to see the connections between the different disciplines and their theories. This helped me to sift through the myriad of concepts, descriptions and design interventions and find common ground. I did not persevere with new ideas, rather I wanted to see where it was possible to link existing ideas and models to help designers focus on what is relevant from their perspective.

However, looking back at the process and the methods that I used, I do see room for improvement. I have not used that many different methods. Most of my research is based on desk research of mainly literature, reports and design guidelines. I did not do much research in the field, although I did do multiple analyses of different settings to test my ideas and assumptions. Unfortunately, most of these steps were unstructured and unplanned. In addition, I have not been able to test my hypotheses and findings either through peer review or by applying the framework in different settings. I think that this is an important part of scientific research as it helps you to be precise in your formulations and to put your thoughts on paper. More importantly, it provides you with valuable feedback from different perspectives. Although I am dissatisfied with the fact that I could not test the framework sufficiently, I do believe that my approach was valuable for (the research in) the design discipline. By making it explicit and by exploring each step thoroughly I believe that I provided a structured way to look at the potential of design. I think that with

my exploration I provided sufficient starting points for empirical testing. The field of urbanism could profit from more empirically sound testing so that designers can be more confident in the workings of the design interventions that they propose.

#### **4. How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?**

I think that the societal value of a master thesis is rather limited. Although it was the objective of the research to contribute to the effectiveness of policies and interventions, I have not been able to either test or discuss my findings or methodology in practice. Furthermore, this project focuses mainly on the exploration of the possibilities rather than the design interventions. This does make it more interesting from an academic perspective. I think my work can be an important stepping stone for a follow-up project, for example in the empirical testing of the design interventions or further research into the possibility to design for specific interactions.

The structured approach to try to achieve consensus through synthesis, as opposed to introducing yet another model, is something which I think holds merit, and I hope that more projects will take this approach. From an ethical point of view, I hope that my project helps designers to think about the impact that design could have, both positive and negative. Furthermore, I think that it is important to question the desires and vision of policy makers and to make explicit what the implications could or would be of policy objectives. Especially when it concerns something like social cohesion, which from a policy perspective is often used to project a certain ideal or vision on a society. It is important to be aware of the political agenda when designing, and to be aware of your own ideals and

biases as well. Urban design is inherently subjective and ethical, and this project made me far more aware of this aspect of the discipline.

#### **5. How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?**

The value of the transferability of my project results is not very big, unless the method that I used is considered a project result as well. My focus was mainly on exploring whether it would even be possible to operationalise a social concept to the spatial dimension. Although my research has shown the potential, I think it would require more expertise and thorough testing before it could be claimed that it is possible to facilitate social cohesion through urban design and planning with specific interventions. So, I consider my research results to be rather limited, they are a starting point for discussions and more research.

On the other hand, I do think that as I kept my design interventions rather general and based them on a variety of design guidelines from various regions, it should be possible to adjust the interventions to a specific context. It was my objective to provide starting points for the design of specific places, and to mainly provide a structured way of thinking about designing for a social concept. This I believe does make the framework transferrable to different contexts, with the caveat that it requires the designer to take into account the specific cultural, political, social, economic and historical aspects of the area or problem to be addressed.

## **6. How did the project influence your academic skills?**

I think this project simultaneously tested my academic skills, and through that gave them a significant boost. Looking back at the other projects I did in my bachelor and master, the academic aspect of it was often of secondary importance, not as important as the quality of the design. Which makes sense, because that is what the programmes are meant to teach. We are after all a design-based discipline. However, we are also part of a university, and it was only during my graduation project that I realised the importance of understanding the scientific method and the value it holds for research and design.

I did enjoy the challenge of making an explorative research and design process as scientific as possible. It was, however, very frustrating to not being able to understand so many terms and methods, especially in combination with the lack of agreement on so many relevant concepts and terms. I have a far greater appreciation for the scientific method, but also for the complexity of the discipline of urban planning and design, and I wish there would be more focus on academic skills and the scientific method within the curricula of the programmes of this faculty. I think the discipline can benefit from making it more established and empirically sound, which would result in more effective design solutions.

## **6. How did your project influence your view of the discipline of urban planning and design?**

This project has definitely complicated my view of the discipline of urban planning and design. I better understand the complexity of it, and thereby I can also see the value of it. However, I have also been confronted with the lack of empirical underpinnings of theories or interventions, the lack of consensus,

and the tendency to create your own model for your project rather than using existing models which are established and well-researched. Which is understandable, as every context is unique and requires specificity that cannot be found in models or frameworks (which are by definition simplifications). However, during my research it made it very difficult to find common ground and connections between different theories, models and concepts. However, now that I have almost finished the project, I start to see why it is the case that there is a lack of empirical testing and why for each design often a new model is created. In a sense I have done so too. I myself have been confronted with the complexity of the built environment and the interrelation between people and spaces. However, while I better understand why there is no consensus on terminology and a lack of empirical evidence of the workings of interventions, I do not agree with the tendency to by lack thereof create new terms or models. I do not think that it contributes to the scientific value of the discipline, rather it seems to me that it leads to a misunderstanding of the discipline by other fields of research. Which is a shame, because I have noticed a move towards interdisciplinary research between the urban design and planning discipline and for example social sciences. There also seems to be a growing awareness of the importance of academic skills and empirical underpinnings of theories and assumptions. See for example the update of the bachelor's programme. Although I won't benefit from it, I am glad to see that the faculty is very much aware of and concerned with the challenges in the real world and always striving to prepare its students as much as possible.

