Internship evaluation

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Placement: Municipality of Groningen
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Abstract

This document is the evaluation of my master’s placement (LKA888M10) at the Municipality of Groningen under Atelier Stadsbouwmeester\(^1\) team X. The placement occurred between April 23\(^{rd}\) 2018 and July 25\(^{th}\) 2018. During the internship I have worked in three different tasks in the field of urban planning and architecture history research. The experience was overall positive and posed a valuable contribution to my master’s degree. The choice to do the internship in the Municipality of Groningen was done by me through the guidance and recommendation of professor Dr. A. M. Martin.

\(^{1}\) The Atelier Stadsbouwmeester is the Dutch office responsible for town planning strategies in the municipal level.
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Introduction

My motivations to pursue an internship in Groningen’s Stadsbouwmeester Atelier was based on my interest in urban planning.

During my bachelor’s in architecture and Town Planning I have had the opportunity to do four internships in different areas, but always in relation to building scale of architecture. During my master’s in History of Architecture and Town Planning in University of Groningen, however, I have found my research interest shifting towards town planning, more specifically the urban environment. Thus, Professors M. A. Martin and C. Wagenaar recommended me to attempt an internship at the town planning division of Gemeente Groningen.

During my internship I have had the opportunity to work with different professionals in the fields of architecture history and conservation, town planning and urban design as well as urban renovation. My experience at Gemeente Groningen greatly impacted the choice of focusing in the city of Groningen for my thesis and provided great inputs into my thesis research.

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2 The municipality of Groningen
Atelier Stadsbouwmeester

Groningen’s stadsbouwmeeter or master planner is Jeroen de Willigen. De Willigen is an advisor on the spatial quality and development of the city of Groningen. The office’s main task is to advise on strategic projects that will impact the city environment, one of its main tools being the Municipality’s Strategic Plan, currently known as the “Next City Plan”.

The City’s Strategic Plan is the unifying idea that should be present in every plan for the city. Some of the current projects are the ‘Grote Markt’ vision, to make the center of Groningen more pedestrian friendly; the attribution of new functions for previous industry sites, like the suikerfabriek and the margins of Eens Canal.

The Atelier works directly with many designers, historians, archeologists and planners in the municipal government, and the interdisciplinary environment was one of the most interesting aspects of my experience.
Initial Placement Plan

Prior to the beginning of the internship, the content of assignments were defined, and a program was proposed as follows.

1. Content of the placement / assignment:

Do research and contribute to the urban planning process within the scope of the “Next City” plan for Groningen.

2. Detailed program of the placement period (with the tasks of the student)

Doing research on the city’s architecture history

Making pertinent urban maps

Participating on public discussions with neighborhood leaderships regarding the urban planning of their respective neighborhoods

Visiting previously mentioned neighborhoods and documenting the local situation (photos, sketches or text)

Participating on the meetings to discuss the urban plan for improvements in Groningen’s neighborhoods.

Doing research about prospective heritage sites in the city (regarding character, originality, history).

3. Learning outcomes: competences to be acquired

Visual representation of complex urban issues through maps

Understanding of the heritage listing process in Groningen

Understanding of Groningen’s urban and architectural history

Critically assessing urban development plans
Internship Activities

My time in the internship was divided in three different projects. The first three weeks I was given the task to update and adapt a set of social-economic, historical and geographical maps of the municipality. The goal was to get me acquainted with the visual language, level of detail and best practices used by the Atelier. The task required a good skillset in software programs like illustrator and photoshop. Hanna Liem, one of the juniors in the office, helped me greatly in improving my efficiency with these software programs. This task helped also to educate myself about the city of Groningen, which was essential for the work. I could learn about the neighborhoods’ history, their urban fabric, social composition and architectural identity. To make the maps, I had access to previous maps made between 2014 and 2016, the ‘Gronometer’, a database about the city per neighborhood, the city structural plan, as well as history books. Information about landscape and physical geography could be translate literally from the previous maps, and the only work that had to be done was adapting the visual image. Other maps, like income, had to be updated to more recent data, and new information like the areas that will become residential in the next 10 to 15 years were added. I also had room to make more exploratory work, like adding green areas or waterways to different maps and looking for possible relationships between the spatial form and the socio-economic data. Attention was given to the social dynamics in post-war neighborhoods, such as income, work availability and mobility. Other maps, like services availability, previous versions of the map only included the city center, and the information had to be extended. For mapping of functions and bus stops, google earth and google map were useful tools to extract information from.
My second task was participating in a team working on the renovation of two neighborhoods in Groningen, De Hoogte and the Indische Buurt. A team of urban planners and architects from the municipal government met regularly with community leaders from these areas, housing company representatives and with a team of architects that were energy specialists. In these meetings problems and solutions were discussed, and then it was my task to make maps summarizing the problems and solutions. The discussions were around socio-economic problems and ways of tackling them through urban planning, for example, identifying underused parks and green spaces or unsafe and noisy streets that could be the target for interference. Other concerns were mobility, barriers and traffic situation. Maps regarding housing ownership and energy efficiency were also requested.

This was a challenging job, given my limited understanding of the Dutch language. For most of the maps I had to rely on notes taken by other people that I could translate, or input from co-workers, in addition to written reports brought to the meeting by the diverse parties. The maps evolved after each meeting, reflecting the progress in the discussion. At first, I was solely responsible for making the maps, but after the first meeting, Lisanne Caspers, one of the junior urban planners worked with me more closely.
On my last four weeks I worked on a third task, consisting of a research about the “Rottinghuis” building system, a prefab construction method from the 1950s and 1960s. This building system was predominant in Groningen, and heavily present in post-war neighborhoods. My research focused in De Wijert, a neighborhood in the south of Groningen. For this research I received some books, reports and archives from Marieke Van Der Heide. The objective of this research is to acknowledge and inform about the important role the prefab building systems had in the post-war expansion of Groningen, not only as a way to build fast but as the source of a new identity. Another objective was to evaluate the current state of preservation and energy efficiency of these buildings, as well as look for possible solutions to better integrate these buildings to modern performance standards.

There has been a lot of pressure from private companies and segments of architecture professionals to replace these post-war buildings with newer constructions, under the grounds that they are not up to today’s sustainability and living standards. However, the municipality wants to maximize the use and potential of the existing building stock, and thus this research was proposed.

On the first part of the research, I presented a literature overview about the Rottinghuis system, focusing on technical and aesthetical elements. On the second part, I presented a literature overview about De Wijert’s architectural and urban character, the neighborhood’s history and how it is perceived by its inhabitants. The last part was based on the “Gronometer” data. The third part consisted of a building list, identifying the construction year, number of dwellings, energy label and main physical characteristics of each building. In this segment, I attempted to identify alterations done to the facades and structure of the buildings. On part three, I made a brief analysis of the buildings structure based on the original plans. I also compared the original drawings to the current state of the buildings to find possible alterations. The last part consisted of a short research on what is being done in the Netherlands to renovate similar postwar architecture, and also one comparative international example. My main focus was identifying literature on restauration and conservation methods specific for postwar architecture. The conclusion included an existing research on possible ways to adapt the Rottinghuis buildings, as well as critic evaluation of the findings and recommendations for further research.
Evaluation

The internship at the Atelier Stadsbouwmeester was a very good complement to my master's degree. The diverse working environment allowed me to work in different projects that required different skillsets, and that helped me realized what I want as a future career. Another benefit was to acquire familiarity with a Dutch work environment.

Task one, making the City maps was, overall, a good start for the internship. One criticism being that it took very long for me to get feedback in this activity, and if I had received closer supervision, the work could have been done more efficiently. That is, however, also an aspect that reflected one of my own weaknesses, which is I seldom felt comfortable asking for help or attention from my co-workers. In part, I believe that was because I was not working as part of any groups during that task, which made my integration into the office slower.

Task two, working with the Neighborhood renovation team, gave me the opportunity to better integrate in the office activities and understand how the work was carried out. I could learn a lot about the municipality decision making process, and how I could contribute using what I learned through my education in Architecture and Town Planning design and history. I learned a lot about my own skillset, and what still must be improved. Not being fluent in Dutch was a challenge for this task, and significantly impaired my ability to work independently. I believe this activity could have been carried out better if I had received more information or instructions about the final goal. In the beginning, there was some miscommunication regarding how the final product should be presented. I see the same the problems I had in the first task repeating themselves: I did not receive enough guidance, but I also had difficulty in asking for help.

The third task was a very good complement to the internship experience, as it allowed me to learn how objective research can be done in a work environment. This task allowed me to apply a lot of the academic knowledge I acquired during my master, such as structuring a research paper objectively, looking at architectural history in a broad but also critical form, and connecting the history of architecture to present and future developments.

As a self-reflection, I was able to grow professionally during my internship experience. I learned about some of my weaknesses, such as attention to detail and asking for help.
But I also learned about some of my strengths, such as being able to carry out work independently and being capable of summarizing and connecting a large amount of information. As an observation for my employer, future interns could benefit from a more structured and through integration to the work environment, as well as more frequent follow-ups.

I find that the tasks were consistent with what was planned in the beginning of the internship, and every planned activity took place. Going back to the four learning outcomes established in the beginning of the placement:

1. Visual representation of complex urban issues through maps;
2. Understanding of the heritage listing process in Groningen;
3. Understanding of Groningen’s urban and architectural history;
4. Critically assessing urban development plans.

I believe all the activities touched the learning outcomes. I am more comfortable making and analysing urban maps, and every activity contributed in its own way for deepening my understanding of Groningen’s history. Other learning outcomes were navigating the archives with more ease, and improving my abilities to use relevant software programs.
Conclusion

My internship at the municipality of Groningen was very constructive, and it has undoubtfully positively impacted my education. The tasks were pertinent to my academic background, and the environment was professional and friendly. More importantly, this experience helped me realize what career I want to pursue after my master’s degree in the University of Groningen.