Reflections and prospects about the relationship between master thesis and design project in interior architectural education

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Abstract: *The Bologna process, initiated in 1999, propelled an ongoing reform of the European higher education. One of many processes is the integration of design schools – formerly belonging to a polytechnic or beaux-arts tradition – into academia. It presents challenges to universities and design schools alike. Commonly, many debates centre around the issue of research: output media, 'measurability' of output and the relationship between research and education. In this paper we would like to focus on the latter by discussing the set-up and organisation of our master programme in interior architecture. Reflecting about existing material of our students stimulated us to explain the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of our current approach. We also propose a line of reasoning about re-organizing the set-up of master thesis and design project at our department in the years to come. In our view, this line of reasoning will allow our students to better blend their research with the design project.*

Keywords: *interior architecture, philosophy of design curriculum, master thesis, master design project.*

Introduction

The Bologna process, initiated in 1999, started a reform of the European higher education that went beyond its initial intention to calibrate programmes and diplomas (European Union 2010). In European higher education, the weight of study programmes is expressed in ECTS credits (European Credit Transfer System) with one academic year usually containing 60 credits. Architecture is commonly offered in 5 years: 3 bachelors (180 ECTS) and 2 master years (120 ECTS). For interior architecture the bachelor programme is of the same length, but the master programme often represents only 60 ECTS credits.

One of many processes that Bologna initiated was the integration of design schools - formerly belonging to a polytechnic or beaux-arts tradition - into academia. This creates challenges to universities and design schools alike. Both tend to see opportunities and develop, for example, an historical argument that universities return to their Renaissance concept of studying the Liberal Arts in all its disciplines – including fine arts, drama, architecture etcetera. But despite these unequivocal aspects, there are equally concerns on both sides. Commonly, they have the issue of research as subject of debate: the media in which output can be manifested (e.g., recognised journal papers versus a musical composition or a painting), 'measurability' of output (e.g., ranked journal and citation index versus an exhibition organised by others of one's work as an architect) and the relationship between research and education.

In this paper we would like to focus on the latter by discussing our master programme in interior architecture.

Where do we come from?

We started our reformed master programme in 2008, following an act of parliament that stipulated the integration of all higher education programmes with more than 180 ECTS credits. Our interior architecture school formerly belonged to the beaux-arts tradition, but as it offers a 4-year programme, it had to prepare itself for becoming part of a university faculty in 2013. It was clear that this integration process was not to affect the specificity of our programme: the quest for a balance between 'objective' and 'subjective types of knowing'. And as the discipline of interior architecture is seeking a stronger body of theory (Marshall-Baker 2000; Clemons & Eckman 2008), this integration-process into academia provided an almost existential framework. Dickinson et al. (2009: 3) state that "interior design is a relatively new field of knowledge, particularly when we look at the induction of interior design programmes at the university level" and Friedman (2001) continues when he indicates that "there is confusion over the true definition of research and how valuable some interior design educators and practitioners find research to the design process." The basic concept of our master programme was therefore to link individual research of the students directly to their design project.

Entering our master programme, students have to choose one out of four units, which each consist of a thematic seminar and a design studio. The four units coincide with the thematic selection of our PhD research areas: retail design, scenography,

adaptive reuse of buildings and domesticity. The unit that master students eventually choose will 'colour' their master project.

The master consists of two parts: 'Master Thesis' and 'Master Design Project'. The first one contains the research part and it accounts for 10 out of 30 credits; the remaining 20 credits are for the Master Design Project. In terms of timing, master students immediately start working on their thesis at the beginning of the academic year (mid September), which they need to have finalized by the end of May (i.e., within a time frame of about nine months). In an ideal scenario, students also start reflecting about and working on their master design project in the same time period. In practice however, most students start to really work on their master design project in January (i.e., a time frame of about five months). At the end of May or at the beginning of June, they need to publicly defend their thesis and design work in front of a jury composed of design professors and renowned practitioners.

What kind of research?

Currently, interior architecture as such is a relative young discipline which still lacks a specific body of knowledge especially in relationship to architecture (Abercrombie 1990; Clemons & Eckman 2008, 2011; Edwards 2011). As a consequence, research in interior architecture typically and mainly relies on theoretical and methodological knowledge of relevant adjacent disciplines. By using information from these disciplines, researchers in interior architecture strive to add to design knowledge (Petermans & Van Cleempoel 2010).

Taken that into account, most of our students' theses of the last five years concern research about interior architecture, whereby they typically start with choosing a particular topic, object, building or environment that they want to explore within the framework of their master thesis. The path which they follow to start collecting information about their topic of interest is being influenced by the unit wherein they have engaged themselves in their master year (respectively retail design, scenography, adaptive reuse or domesticity), but in general terms, they usually describe, explore and explain the phenomena which they study while relying on knowledge from adjacent disciplines such as for instance architecture, philosophy, product design, environmental psychology or marketing. They all are being stimulated to study and evaluate these knowledge sources with the eyes and the mind-set of a soon-to-be interior architect.

The central idea of this set-up and organisation of our master programme in interior architecture is thus that the results of the thesis should help to inform and guide the student's design process. We have operated this concept for the last five years and tutors have noticed that many students wrestle with translating the findings of their thesis into their design project.

Faced with this challenge, we want to discuss our current philosophy with regards to the interaction between master thesis and the design project within our four thematic seminars. Building on existing material of our students, we explain the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of this approach with regards to the organisation and progress of master thesis and design project. Building on our accumulated insights originating in the work at our department, we propose a line of

reasoning about the re-organizing of the set-up of master thesis and design project at our department in the years to come. In our view, this line of reasoning will allow our students to better blend their research with the design project.

Where are we now?

In this section a SWOT analysis is used as a means to identify the key internal and external factors of our current approach with regards to the organization of master thesis and design project. Examining and reflecting about students' works from the past few years inspired us to help clarify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of our current method. As usual with SWOT analyses, issues that can be a 'strength' for one aspect can be a 'weakness' for another.
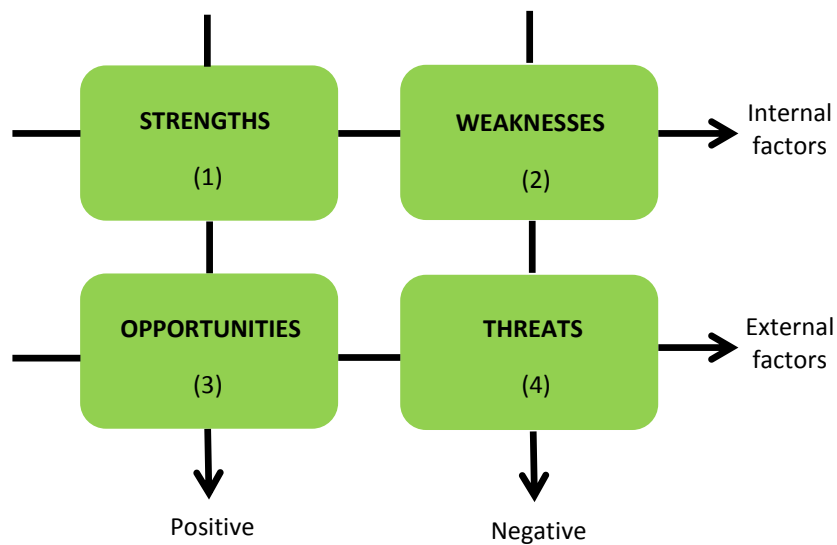
Figure 1. *SWOT analysis.*

For each SWOT element, we formulate factors that can be traced back (i) to an individual person (i.e., a student), or (ii) to our interior architectural department and the choices that have been made in the last few years to define the design curriculum and the organisation of master thesis and design project.

(1) Strengths:

- Topic selection based on **personal background and student's identity**: when students choose a particular unit, master thesis and design project on the basis of their personal interest and identity, they usually are well motivated and passionate to truly dive into their topic of interest. Indeed, after three bachelor years, most students have a fairly good idea which

topic interests them or which direction suits them, inspires and triggers them to further explore not only in their master year but also afterwards, in their future professional career. Knowing and realizing that can then be a motivation for making a choice for a particular unit, triggered by the idea of challenging oneself.

- **Collaboration with external parties**: by doing research on a particular topic students can get the opportunity to work with renowned designers, to study in-depth illustrious case studies etcetera.
- **Developing a strong portfolio:** translating their research results into an appealing design project allows students to develop a strong portfolio, which is important for their individual development as an interior architect.
- **Coupling of master thesis to design project:** as described in the first sections of the paper, in 2008 our master programme was thoroughly reformed. Master thesis and design project have been rethought, whereby the central idea is that the results of the thesis should help to inform and guide the design project. In the authors' viewpoints, since the thorough reform of the curriculum, the overall quality level of master thesis and design project has risen. This evolution almost certainly has been influenced by the fact that since the reform of our curriculum, there has been more attention towards teaching students research skills and methods. As a consequence, from 2008 to date, there are several examples of master students' work that nicely illustrate the additional value of coupling thesis and design project.
- Depending on the unit that they choose, students' design projects can originate in an **existing problem situation that is present in design practice** (e.g., proprietors of a particular building who are looking for a 'suitable' reuse, a city that is searching for the creation of a new and original interpretation of a particular place specifically focused on youngsters etcetera). Students thus have the feeling to be working on a very concrete and socially relevant research topic. In these projects, the research questions are already explicit from the start, which makes the link between master thesis and design project stronger and in many cases also leads to stronger design projects.

(2) Weaknesses:

- **Multitasking and time management**: next to working on their master thesis and design project, master students also need to invest a substantial period of time in the first semester of their master year to conduct an internship at a design studio. This first real confrontation with the daily design practice does indeed usurp a lot of their resources, but combined with the perception of having sufficient time due to the deadline tends to interfere with working on the master thesis - especially given the relatively "long-term" deadline (May).
- **Intake of first-year students**: currently, students who start studying interior architecture have a very diverse educational background. On the one hand, students in interior architecture seem to be attracted by the

creative singularity of a future interior architecture profession in which they – evidently – need to be properly trained. On the other hand, interior architecture is an academic education, which legally 'obliges' universities to train and 'develop' students in a way that clearly differs from professional bachelors in interior design that are organised at university colleges. Currently, many universities that organise interior architectural education struggle to find an equilibrium between attention for practice and theory. As a consequence, the communication about 'do and don'ts' to future students is not always that clear, so that various first-year students seem to have incorrect expectations when they start. In addition, interior architecture currently does not truly have an academic appearance, which also influences the intake of first-year students. As a consequence, in the master year, supervisors are being confronted with a group of students with a very diverse educational background, which undoubtedly influences the work they do in the framework of their master thesis and design project.

- **Familiarity with supervisors leading to projects "aimed to please"**: many of our master students know the master unit's supervisors already from courses and studios in their bachelor years. As a consequence, they have a relative good idea about 'what to expect' from the various supervisors: they often know their work and this seems to give a number of students the idea that their master thesis and design project need to meet the expectations which they seem to have with particular supervisors. As a result, many of these theses currently are rather confirmatory; students clearly have the idea that they have to work out their thesis according to a particular frame which they do not easily break through. As a consequence, many theses seem to be rather 'executive works' (i.e., in the sense of 'I study and report about issues which I think the supervisor thinks are important') and do not seem to result in innovative pieces of research that truly contribute to the body of knowledge of our discipline.

- **Identification with subject of master thesis**: if students choose to focus on a particular research topic that is being proposed by a particular supervisor but which not fully suits or interests them personally, they often find it rather hard to truly get into their stride. In addition, they do not seem to fully immerse or engage themselves into their research.

- **Despite the explicit coupling** of master thesis to design project, they are still too frequently considered as **separate entities** and in their executions effectively decoupled from one another. This decoupling leads to several negative outcomes: a decrease in the perceived relevance of the research activities for the design project, students who get caught up in their research lose sight of the project, or research results that are in essence no longer applicable to the design project.

- '... **design is not only an art, but is also a science that can utilize empirical evidence'**[1]: as a design discipline soon to be integrated in a university context, interior architecture struggles with the search for finding an equilibrium between so-called 'scientific' and 'artistic' research methods.

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[1] Citation from Dickinson et al., 2009

Master theses in interior architecture currently mostly try to work according to the framework and viewpoints of well-established 'scientific' methods. Hence, there are few students who explore how 'artistic' research methods could help them to reach their goal, namely to work out a thesis whose results help to guide the development of their design project. Our department thus needs to further reflect about the use of so-called 'scientific' and 'artistic' research methods as means that help our master students to obtain their goal, namely the development of a good and consistent master thesis and design project that both contribute to the further development of the body of knowledge of interior architecture.

- **'The medium is the message'**: currently, a master thesis typically is a written document in the style of an academic paper. The current style and structure of the medium seem to intimidate some students.
- **Well-defined contents**: currently, students need to follow a prescribed table of contents which they need to fill in with their research findings, that can be more theoretically or empirically inspired. The end results are rather 'decent' master theses, which seldom are being translated in truly innovative design projects. They seem to not dare to take risks, in this respect.

(3) Opportunities:

- **Integration in a university context –'audience' specific opportunities:** 'migrating' architectural and interior architectural education from university college to a university level communicates another 'message' or 'image' about our core product, namely our education and research, which potentially appeals to more foreign students or to people from professional practice. Possibly also the intake of first-year students will change for the better, due to this evolution.
- **Integration in a university context – 'department' specific opportunities**: as from September 2013, architectural and interior architectural education in Belgium officially will be integrated into a university context. This development undoubtedly will influence and fortify the research character of the discipline, which will be translated in the further development of research in interior architecture and contributions to the discipline's body of theory.

(4) Threats:

- **Rumours and reputation**: it is self-evident that students talk about the diverse design studios and their respective supervisors. In an ideal scenario, 3rd year students who need to make a choice for a particular studio for their master year do not let their choice for a particular studio be influenced by these kinds of talks. In practice, there will always be students who choose for a particular studio while basing themselves mainly on rather pragmatic arguments.

- **Collaboration with other parties**: getting the possibility to come into contact with external parties or to get inspired by external parties can hugely distract students from their main research topic. Sometimes, students also do not have truly realistic expectations with regards to the participation and potential contribution of these external parties.
- **Nearby integration in a university context versus 'you can go your own way…'**: the inescapable movement of integrating into a university context seems to worry many students and supervisors. They have the idea that the integration will force our design department to fit within a particular, well-defined and established university frame wherein the existing 'freedom' of filling-in a master thesis and design project in your own way will be abandoned. In addition, the integration in a university context might lead to a form of self-censorship by students and their supervisors, whereby the notion of 'research' is defined too narrowly, based solely on the scientific protocols and methodological rules valid in other academic disciplines.

Where do we want to go?

Our ambition is to stimulate students to produce even more qualitative and innovative projects and also accompanying research theses that are more representative of interior architecture as a design discipline. Specifically with regards to the intertwining of master thesis and project, we currently distinguish at least two main obstacles to reach this goal. On the one hand, the wide variety of types of projects, as already apparent in the four units, and, consequently, the broad range of issues student-designers have to deal with, are often not easily reconciled within the prescribed unitary structure and trajectory. On the other hand, the current lack of a solid conceptual, methodological and communicative framework of interior architecture as an academic discipline tends to push our students towards more traditional, "safe" research avenues, which, although certainly fruitful to some extent, do not tread onto what can be considered the core of a design discipline.

To address these obstacles, we have thoroughly reflected about the issue where we want to go with our master theses and design projects. Therefore, we want to propose to explicitly present students different types of trajectories that they can follow in their master year.

While acknowledging the fact that each project (and thesis) is unique, there are certainly identifiable types of projects: projects that share a similar structure, design process and methodology. Although this categorization, as visualized in figure 2, is by no means clear-cut, in our situation, this roughly corresponds to our four units that were discussed earlier in the paper. In essence, for each unit, a prototypical skeleton-structure and temporal path for the thesis-project are proposed with the following assumptions:

(i) The different functions of a thesis (contextualize and document, justify and transcend) can appear in different stages or parts of the thesis-project. For example, the "new" knowledge can be found in an innovative application

of a new material for a piece of furniture versus the spatial and historical analysis of a to be reused building.

(ii) A particular set of necessary aspects needs to be addressed in each thesis-project (at least to a minimal degree), this to ensure and maximize relevance for the discipline: a broader theoretical framework (e.g. the concept of "experience economy"), conceptual reflections on spatial issues (e.g. how can "experience" be translated in a store design), and practical aspects from the "lowest" level of detail (scale 1:1, such as constructive details of a cashier desk) to the "largest" level (scale 1:50, such as the area to implement a certain store concept).

(iii) Given the limited amount of time and energy available to a student-researcher, not all projects will allow all of these aspects to be completed to the same degree. The relative importance of these aspects, i.e., the amount of time and energy students invest in each of these aspects, should reflect the specificity of the design challenge. The proposed "standard" distribution for the four different prototypical trajectories can be seen in Figure 2.

(iv) The proposed skeleton-structure for the research should still allow for the necessary freedom to address the questions that arise during the project, but there needs to be sufficient attention to 'designerly' research methods (e.g. artistic research). This offers opportunities to not only do research *about* interior architecture, but also research *by* design *in* interior architecture.
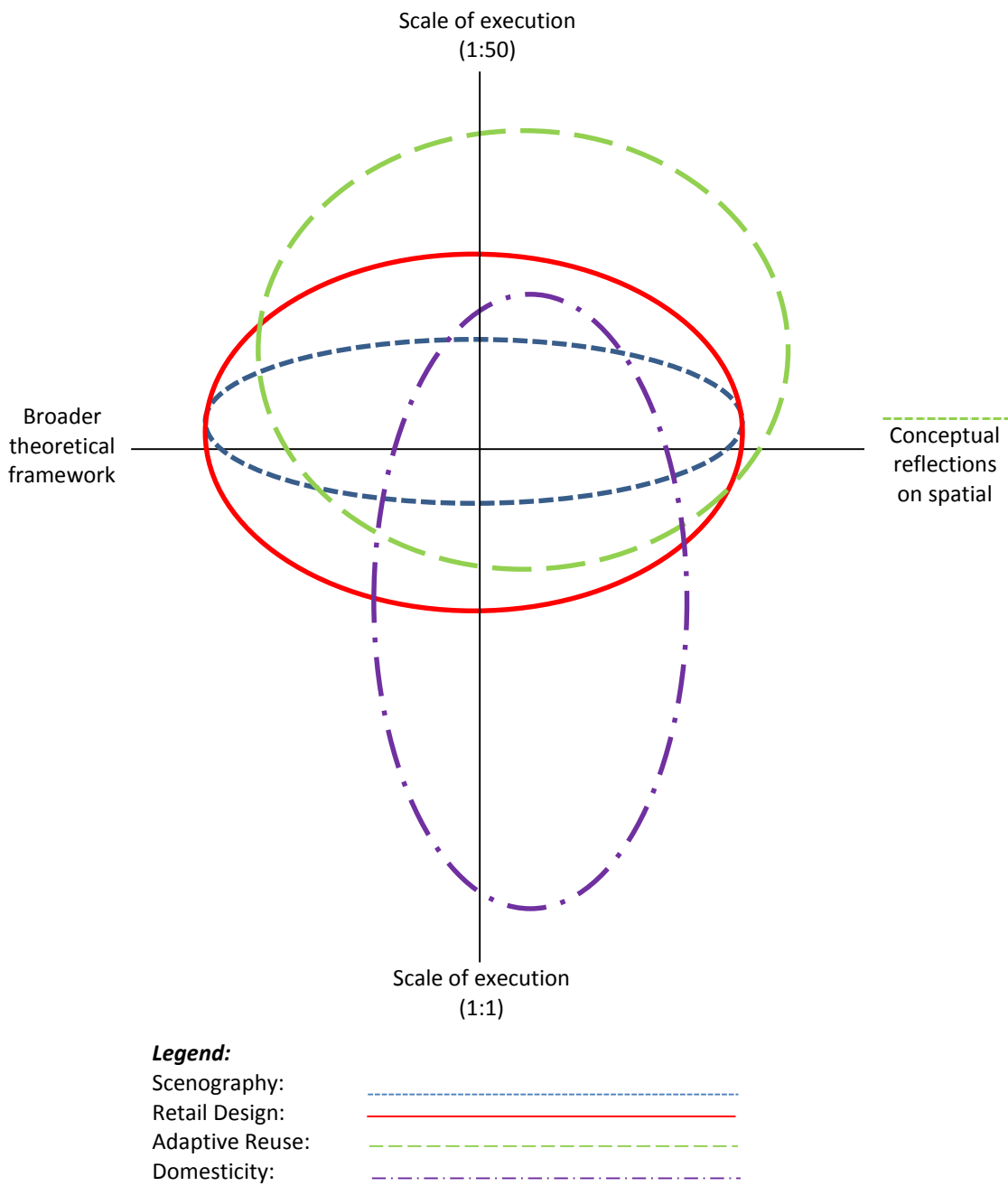
Figure 2. *Different trajectories for master thesis and design project.*

Currently, figure 2 makes a rather rigid distinction between the trajectories that can be followed for each of our four units, whereby it seems that students need to strictly follow the trajectory that we now have visualized for each unit. However in practice, it should and will be possible for all students to choose the trajectory that best fits the pathway they have in mind to develop their project.

At the end of the third bachelor year and at the beginning of the master year, students should be presented with all proposed trajectories and when choosing a particular project, they also subscribe to a particular trajectory. Importantly, these trajectories are not totally rigid, but allow for flexibility depending on the progress of the project. They mainly serve as scaffolds, to support students in their endeavour to create innovative and qualitative interior architectural projects.

Discussion

By explicitly offering students different possible trajectories, displaying the variety and richness of interior architecture as a design discipline, students could be encouraged to develop a more 'open' view on research and explore more 'designerly' research methods. Although these methods are typically more difficult to formalize and often have different aspirations, they should adhere to the same kind of rigour as other, more classical methods. Indeed, if a student wants to make use of a specific method, it should be used correctly. Artistic freedom can be no excuse for sloppy research, just a scientific thoroughness can never be an excuse for bad, uninspiring design. This implies that during the bachelor years, the student needs to be made sufficiently familiar with scientific and artistic, 'designerly' methods that can be combined in the master project.

Ultimately, the ambition is to inspire more students to create and present 'hybrid' research, both in content and in form: they are invited, depending on the chosen project, to interpret existing data or to generate new data regarding for example the intended users, or the properties and possibilities of used materials, but also to more overtly explore design possibilities by visual and lateral thinking and by other more intuitive, 'a-rational' approaches. In their presentations, students should also be challenged to explore the boundaries of the medium of a paper, exploring other forms to present their research results. This can be imbedded in a wider tendency within academia itself, especially in the humanities, to critically evaluate the dissemination of scholarly work in the digital age (see http://hackingtheacademy.org/scholarship-and-scholarly-communication).

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