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Reference:

Vallet Nathalie, Somers Inge, Corthaut Michel.- Redesigning public libraries in Flanders : triggering the societal context awareness of interior students
Journal of interior design / Interior Design Educators Council [Oakbrook Terrace, Ill.] - ISSN 1071-7641 - 44:4(2019), p. 223-240
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1111/JOID.12152>
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1598070151162165141>

Redesigning Public Libraries in Flanders. Triggering the Societal Context Awareness of Interior Students

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ABSTRACT

Developing societal context awareness in interior architecture students is one of the main objectives of the bachelor thesisⁱ at the University of Antwerp (Belgium). By means of a two-year project on public libraries (2014-2016), the coaches of the design studio initiated research into the changing role of public libraries and the societal embedding of interior architecture, as well as the empathic role of the designer. The article is based on data acquired by the use of various qualitative research techniques, such as focus group debates with the studio coaches, analysis of the coaching sessions with the students, and analysis of the comments of the expert jury in the first research year, supported by half-structured individual interviews with students in the second research year. Based on an initial explorative evaluation of this research project it is clear that the development of societal context awareness in students is hindered by three phenomena: an activated selective perception, a dominant comfort-zone reflex and copy-cat behaviour. The article subsequently reports on (i) the subject of the bachelor thesis (i.e. Flemish public libraries and their societal challenges), (ii) the pedagogical design of the renewed bachelor thesis, (iii) the ex-ante and ex-post perceived societal awareness of the students, and (iv) an initial set of identified enablers and disablers of the learning process. The article concludes that interior educators should continue to invest in triggering and developing societal awareness in their students if the interior discipline aspires to 'the social compact to do good' (Anderson, Honey and Dudek, 2007).ⁱⁱ

1. INTRODUCTION

The discipline of interior architectureⁱⁱⁱ faces various challenges that alter the design competences needed for the future. In this article we will focus on one particular design competence, which we would like to depict as *societal context awareness*.

Our notion of societal context awareness is based on the overall importance of the contextual embedding of interior design. In essence, designing interiors is a human endeavour. As such, it is shaped by the interplay of the economic, political, cultural and social conditions of the timespan in which these endeavours take place. Therefore, interiors can be seen as 'the dynamic backdrop for human social activity, embodying human social interaction, perception and personal, social, psychological and cultural dynamics, which are contextualized around the complex yet everyday interface with objects, other people, and the surrounding three-dimensional enclosure' (Poldma, 2003, p. 31). To emphasize the importance of the contextual responsiveness of interior design, the notion of 'interior design in context' has been introduced as essential within the current theoretical underpinnings of the discipline (Cunningham, 2014, p. vii).^{iv} Accordingly, the theoretical debate also bears witness to an increasing interest in the societal impact of interiors (Anderson, Honey and Dudek, 2007; Antiquino, 2013; Caan, 2011; Danko, Meneely and Portillo, 2006; Embrechts, Manders and Somers, 2010; Gaines and Bourne, 2015; Guerin and Martin, 2010; Mendoza, 2011; Pable and Fishburne, 2013; Pable and Waxman, 2011; Pable, 2013; Poldma, Jutras, Labbé and

Tissaoui, 2012; Smith, Lommerse and Metcalfe, 2011; Vaikla-Poldma, 2013). Finally, this growing societal awareness coincides with an increasing interest in the urban and public interior (Attiwill, 2011; Giunta, 2009; Pimlott, 2016; Poot, Van Acker, and De Vos, 2015).^v

Our focus on societal context awareness is not only related to the internal debate within the interior discipline, but also to important changes within the discipline of public management. Given the subsequent trends of New Public Management (NPM) and Public Governance (PG), public institutions throughout the Western world have, for instance, redefined their position and policy priorities since the beginning of the 1990s (Dunleavy and Hood, 1994; Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow and Tinkler, 2006; Koliba, Meek and Zia, 2010). This is often done in light of particular societal challenges such as the emergent knowledge society, the digital gap and the need for social cohesion. Accordingly, public institutions have started to reconsider their public interior in order to meet these societal challenges and associated policy priorities. Emphasizing, for instance, an easily accessible public service clearly demands a particular, ‘fitting’ interior design of public buildings and spaces. Within the interior discipline this focus still leaves room for further development in empirical research as well as in theory.

In light of improving the societal context awareness, a vital question for education institutions in interior architecture arises: how can we *trigger*, *develop* and *improve* the societal context awareness of our students? During the last two years, the programme of interior architecture of the University of Antwerp (Belgium) has tried to elaborate an appropriate answer.

This societal focus of the Antwerp interior architecture programme was the consequence of the introduction of a new curriculum. Due to the Bologna agreement (1999), six design-related disciplines, originally organized within the context of a College of Higher Education (Artesis University College), integrated in 2013 as the new Faculty of Design Sciences into the University of Antwerp.^{vi} This integration incited the interior architecture programme to change its curriculum from a vocational approach towards a more academic one, based on the idea that interior architecture is the discipline concerned with the design of the human *séjour*, or in other words, with the design of the relationship between a specific user and a specific place.^{vii} During the first bachelor year the relationship between user and space, between object and space, between user and object and the integration of all three relations are studied. In the second year of the programme and first semester of the last bachelor year different interior phenomena are covered such as morphology, typology, materials, textures, atmosphere, time, space and storytelling. These relationships and phenomena are studied within a broad cultural, historical and theoretical context. The bachelor thesis^{viii}, which is programmed in the last semester of the third bachelor year, is considered the keystone or synthesis of the bachelor programme, in which the students demonstrate their skills, competences and knowledge. In this renewed academic curriculum the previously described competence of societal awareness has

become an important issue. The bachelor thesis in particular was seen as an appropriate pedagogical *vehicle* to realize this ambition by focusing on the fourth relationship, namely the one between designer and user. As such, a new approach to the bachelor thesis was gradually elaborated and implemented.

Figure 1: Antwerp Interior Programme Vision

In this article we will report on the features and consequences of this renewed bachelor thesis. Thus, the central research question is: How does the renewed bachelor thesis within the University of Antwerp's programme trigger the societal context awareness of students in interior architecture? What are the perceived changes in societal awareness, and how do they come about?

In a first section, we will give a short description of the methodology used to generate an answer to the previously defined research question. Then we will describe subsequently (i) the public institutions involved (i.e. Flemish public libraries), (ii) the modelling or design of the bachelor thesis assignment and (iii) the perceived changes in the societal context awareness of the interior students. In a last section, we will reflect on the assumed enablers and disablers of these perceived changes.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As the development of the renewed bachelor thesis assignment over a period of two academic years is rather explorative in nature, the methodology for answering the central research question uses qualitative research techniques (Charmaz, 2006; Stern

and Porr, 2011; Birks, 2011). Although the set of combined techniques can certainly still be improved, the present combination already generates a rich set of interesting and useful *first* insights.

The gained insights of the first year are predominantly based on the technique of focus group debates involving the four members of the bachelor thesis teaching staff. During these focus group debates, staff members reflect on the following issues: (i) *how* do students respond to the gradually received information of the teaching staff and the library experts on the changing identity of the cases involved (e.g. acceptance, confirmation, surprise, indifference); (ii) to what extent do our students *understand* the meaning and impact of this information on their own design process (e.g. incomprehensible, clear, puzzling, disturbing, challenging, resistance); (iii) to what extent do our students themselves collect additional case information, and *what* kind of information do they collect, *how* and *why* (e.g. curiosity, fascination, active-passive, caution, rigour); (iv) to what extent do our students *use* this information in their design assignment (e.g. when explaining, arguing and commenting on their central design focus, their subsequent design choices and changes made over time); and (v) to what extent do our students show a growing consideration, concern and awareness of the societal challenges faced by the cases and to be met in the design assignment (e.g. discussing, asking, reflecting, considering)? To vouchsafe a thorough debate, an additional staff member specialized in studying the changing identity of the discipline of interior architecture joins the debates.^{ix} The answers of the four members of the teaching staff are based on the informal talks and weekly coaching sessions with the group of approximately 60 students. During the last focus group debate, comments made by the jury, involving eight representatives of the two Flemish public libraries, are also included (see also 3).

In the second year, the focus group technique is complemented by one additional qualitative research technique. As such, 18 semi-structured individual interviews with the students are conducted. As we still had an explorative ambition, we preferred the use of interactive dialogues that guarantee a rich data set, instead of written questionnaires that generate rather limited and standardized answers. We also did not use *ex-ante* questionnaires, in order to avoid ‘alarming’ the students and thus influencing their behaviour and our research outcomes. Thus, nearly 30 per cent of the total number of 60 students are involved in an in-depth discussion. Each interview is based on three questions: (i) What was your overall image of a Flemish public library *before* the bachelor research project and what were their societal challenges, main functions and (associated) interior design features; (ii) How has this image changed after the realization of your bachelor research project; and (iii) What aspect(s) of the assignment have mainly altered and/or confirmed your initial image? In comparing and contrasting the answers of the students with the answers of the teaching staff (i.e. focus group debates), we were able to check whether the perceptions and interpretations made by the teaching staff match the actual experiences of the students

(i.e. triangulation of the data). This improved the validity of our overall research findings and conclusions.

In both years, the data analysis is realized by means of handwritten research notes, digital memos (e.g. Word documents) and visual schemes (e.g. drawings of uncovered learning loops and possible causal relations). As a result the transparency and traceability of the research results is guaranteed. We do not use any digital coding device (e.g. Nvivo), as the data set is not so vast that it becomes unmanageable when using rather traditional and handmade codings.

3. THE (R)EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN FLANDERS

When analysing the public institutions involved, the Flemish public libraries, we want to emphasize the overall dynamic nature of their contextual challenges (Vallet et al., 2015). The creation of liveable cities and the knowledge society are only two examples of the many societal challenges that shape their changing identity (Smith, 1996; Evans, 2002; Geller, 2003; Sproull and Patterson, 2004; Lees, Slater and Wyly, 2007; Mellon, 2009; Brown-Saracino, 2010). Although the process of change is intensively discussed within the inner circle of public libraries, its precise features and societal impact is certainly not yet fully understood, either by library practitioners, library academics or by politicians (Aabo, 2005; MacLennan, 2007; Dahlkild, 2011, Vallet, 2013).

This is presumably also the reason why the awareness of the societal challenges and identity far beyond the borders of the public library world is not self-evident. In Flanders, for instance, recent research initiatives have revealed that political and administrative policymakers who finance, build and invest in public libraries do not always know the precise contextual setting and ambitions of the public library (Vallet 2013 and 2015). This is somewhat odd, as the Flemish platform of public libraries CULTUURCONNECT has organized several interactive brainstorm sessions to inform users and policymakers on these new challenges and ambitions. Subsequently, these challenges and ambitions have also been the subject of formal library plans presented explicitly to their respective local governments.

In light of these recent research findings, it becomes interesting to investigate whether students of interior architecture are – more? – familiar with or aware of the changing context and identity of Flemish public libraries, and how their awareness can be influenced by an interior design assignment on these public libraries. So Flemish public libraries have become an interesting subject for the renewed bachelor thesis at the University of Antwerp.

4. MODELLING THE BACHELOR THESIS ASSIGNMENT

Once the subject was chosen, the modelling and fine-tuning of the assignment could begin. At first, it was not entirely clear how the new bachelor thesis could succeed in

its previously described aims. Therefore the teaching staff decided to opt for an explorative approach in which the bachelor thesis would be gradually developed and fine-tuned over a period of at least two consecutive academic years. Additionally, the teaching staff wanted to use 'real-life' assignments. As such, existing Flemish public libraries were invited to present an important societal challenge for which the students were asked to elaborate a 'fitting' interior design (see also 4.1).

In the next sections we will report on the societal setting of the public libraries involved (i.e. What is the societal context awareness to be triggered by the bachelor research project?) and on the features of the assignment itself (i.e. How does the teaching staff attempt to develop and improve the societal context awareness of the students?).

4.1 Design Cases: On Social Cohesion, Rejuvenation and E-Culture

In the first year the students were asked to focus on the societal challenges of two Flemish public libraries in Kortrijk and Heusden-Destelbergen (i.e. real-life case studies). Both public libraries were suggested by the Flemish public library platform CULTUURCONNECT. The suggestion was based on two important societal challenges these public libraries try to tackle, improving (i) the social cohesion as well as (ii) the well-being of young people (i.e. rejuvenation).

In the subsequent year the societal context setting was reconsidered in view of societal challenges that fit more directly into the everyday life of the students. So the bachelor thesis focused on the digital society or e-culture. The overall challenge for public libraries is: What are the needs of different target groups within our present society in relation to e-culture, and how does this influence the spatial interior design of public libraries? Within the public library literature, a lot of implications are mentioned, such as for instance the presence of a so-called 'performance or maker space' (e.g. fab-lab, design workshop, creative studio and community centre) (Marling, Jensen and Kib, 2008). The question, however, remains: What does this precisely mean in terms of spatial facilities and what are the implications for the interior design of the public libraries involved? When looking for relevant case studies, all Flemish public libraries were asked to define and explain their specific challenges in relation to the digital society or e-culture. In total, approximately 20 Flemish public libraries actually responded to this call. After screening them according to the formulated learning objectives, two public libraries were chosen: the public libraries of Elsene (Brussels) and Diksmuide.

Kortrijk Case Study (academic year 2014-2015)

The project in the city of Kortrijk (Belgium) was based on the policy objective to create library branches that fit the specific profile of each urban district. This ambition is intended to support the social cohesion of the city. The bachelor thesis focused on the particular urban district of Lange Munte. The design of the new library branch was to stimulate the presently absent social cohesion among different types of local residents, such as (i) isolated and middle-class senior

citizens, (ii) poor and not (yet fully) integrated immigrants accounting for more than 20 nationalities, and (iii) young families expected to move to the urban district as a result of a recently launched housing project. The new library branch in Lange Munte was located in a reconverted 1970s church building (Fig. 2). To vouchsafe the previously described objectives, the church building was also to house the existing urban community centre and neighbourhood societies (e.g. local brass bands, theatre groups). Figure 3 represents a bachelor thesis design in which this desired social cohesion is facilitated and stimulated. The students created a square – a community place - in front of the church, to facilitate gathering, skating, relaxing and performing.

So the challenge for the bachelor students was to elaborate an interior design for a public library branch within an existing modernist church building that supported and stimulated the social cohesion of the selected urban district (i.e. societal challenge).

Figure 2. Sint Paulus church, Lange Munte, Kortrijk (Belgium), 2015, front elevation, existing situation (photograph courtesy of the City of Kortrijk, www.kortrijk.be)

Figure 3. Bachelor thesis design for public library, Kortrijk (Belgium), 2014-2015, encounter zone, by students Jonathan Beeckmans and Didier Van Kerkhoven

Heusden-Destelbergen Case Study (academic year 2014-2015)

The public library project of Destelbergen was based on the policy objective to create a 'house of the child' within an already existing library branch. As such, this library branch should not only focus on the information, education and cultural participation of children from 1 to 18 years old, but should also house other organizations that provide specialized services to the same target group (e.g. a medical childcare centre for babies and toddlers). The library branch was located in a very new, modern but rather small-scale cubic building.

Thus, a high concentration of different functions and organizations within a relatively small surface area was the major challenge. As such, the students had to elaborate an interior design for a public library within a small existing cubic building that supported and stimulated the development and well-being of young people within the municipality (i.e. societal challenge). Figures 4 and 5 illustrate this condensed multiuse of the small-scale cubic building. The focus of the students was the seamless transition between the library section, areas for children to read and be read and play and the waiting and consult area of the 'house of the child'.

Figure 4. Bachelor thesis design for public library, Heusden-Destelbergen (Belgium), 2014-2015, library section and meeting area, by students Marie Kuitenbrouwer and Sophie Leroy.

Figure 5. Bachelor thesis design for public library, Heusden-Destelbergen (Belgium), 2014-2015, waiting and consult area of the 'house of the child', by students Marie Kuitenbrouwer and Sophie Leroy.

Elsene Case Study (academic year 2015-2016)

The Sans Souci public library project in the urban quarter of Elsene in Brussels was based on the policy objectives (i) to facilitate experiments with new digital technology that stimulate the creativity of children; (ii) to integrate the digital collection of information; and (iii) to create attractive spaces for work, social encounter and creativity (i.e. 'maker-space'). The library branch of Elsene is located in a renovated lift factory, entirely enclosed by a dense urban building block. The public library itself is housed on the ground floor and the first floor (Figs. 6 and 7). The other floors of the building are used for private housing facilities.

So the challenge for the students was to elaborate an interior design for a public library in a former factory that met the needs of the urban district in a digital society.

Figure 6. Public library Sans Souci, Elsene-Brussels (Belgium), 2015, interior, ground floor (photograph © www.google.be/maps)

Figure 7. Bachelor thesis design for public library Sans Souci, Elsene-Brussels (Belgium), 2015-2016, plan of ground floor with overview of all combined activities, by student Robbe Sevens.

BACHELOR
BIBLIOTHEEK
ELSENE
DURRIG LUYCKX

ORGANISATIE + MAKERSPACES

Diksmuide Case Study (academic year 2015-2016)

The public library project in the municipality of Diksmuide was based on the policy objectives (i) to create more open space by optimizing the digital collection; (ii) to have digitally equipped spaces for reading, social encounter, learning, experimenting and 'dwelling'; (iii) to install a media lab for youngsters; and (iv) to decrease the digital threshold for specific target groups (e.g. elderly people). The library of Diksmuide is located in the church building of a former abbey, originally built in the fifteenth century and rebuilt after the First World War in 1920 (Figs. 8 and 9). Other residents of the former abbey building are the cultural centre, the municipal youth department and the academy of music. As such, the former abbey building has become a cultural site particularly focused on children and young people.

So the challenge for the students was to elaborate an interior design for a public library within a former church building that supported and stimulated particular societal challenges for mainly juvenile users within our digital society. The represented project succeeded in meeting these challenges and at the same time it restored the intrinsic spatial qualities and characteristics of the church; (1) by accentuating the strong presence of rhythm; (2) by revealing the remarkable decorative elements; (3) by re-focusing on the meaning of the church as meeting place.

Figure 8. Public library, Diksmuide (Belgium), 2015, interior (photograph courtesy of the teaching staff © M. Corthaut)

Figure 9. Bachelor thesis design for public library, Diksmuide (Belgium), 2015-2016, reuse of church building, by student Naomi Van Hoeck

Youth section

Entrance and reception area

Meeting and reading place

4.2 Gradually Stimulating Students

In this section we will report on the features of the renewed bachelor thesis, consisting of three subsequent phases, (i) a concentrated kick-off phase, (ii) an interactive and individual design phase, and (iii) a confronting and reflective evaluation phase.

The pedagogical approach of this renewed bachelor thesis was not based on a particular theoretical model. As such, the pedagogical considerations made were based on the one hand on the teaching expertise of the teaching-staff involved in coaching design assignments in a studio setting. On the other hand the pedagogical insights on the knowledge transfer between teacher and student during the so-called design studio dialogue, aligned with the growing insights of the PhD. research of Marjan Michels (Michels, 2018), a colleague of the teaching staff. The findings of her PhD. will be used more explicitly as a pedagogical theoretical framework, in our curriculum and in future assignments focusing on students' societal awareness.

A Concentrated Kick-Off Phase

The start of the bachelor thesis is situated in the beginning of the second semester. In the first week, the students are confronted with a rather general and multi-layered frame of reference. As such, they (i) receive relevant information on the societal challenges of public libraries throughout the world, (ii) collect additional and more particular information themselves on the interior architecture of public libraries and (iii) visit the sites of the Flemish public libraries involved. Let us further describe each activity within this concentrated kick-off week.

In the first year, the relevant information on the societal challenges of public libraries in general is given by means of two rather traditional lectures. These lectures are not only based on scientific research (e.g. publications and research reports of the teaching staff), but also illustrated by examples that visually reflect the immense variety of the changing public library identity (e.g. photographs, pictures, sketches and plans of the interior). By using visual representations, the teaching staff wants to be sure that the story of the changing identity of public libraries actually captures the general interest and attention of their students. In the second year the teaching staff wants to increase the societal context awareness by going from two lectures to four, as well as a subsequent workshop organized by external professors specialized in library sciences and architecture.^x The lectures consist of inspiring examples of existing digital public libraries in different European countries. The subsequent workshops facilitate a more in-depth and interactive debate with the students on the features of these examples.

In the first year, the self-organized data collection by the students during the kick-off week consists of looking for examples of public libraries on the Internet as well as in the architecture archives of the university library. The teaching staff wants the students to share and internalize the experienced awareness by presenting

these examples to each other in small roundtable debates. In the second year, the students are asked to focus more explicitly on the case studies involved (see above). So they have to make a joint documentation dossier on the specific features of the societal challenges and respective design features of both public libraries involved. This already enables them to gain more in-depth knowledge on the particular subject of their design assignment.

Finally, there is the organization of the site visits, during which the students receive in-depth information on the societal challenges and design needs as perceived by the various stakeholders involved (e.g. the alderman for culture, the public library director, the public social workers involved in the public library project). In the process, the teaching staff wants to confront the students with the complex, and sometimes even contrary, nature of perceived societal challenges and associated design requests. Subsequently, the students are stimulated to ask questions, take photographs, draw sketches and make notes and measurements of the respective sites. In this way, the students are stimulated to actually understand and absorb the contextual setting and holistic 'story' of the public library involved.

An Interactive and Individual Design Phase

After the kick-off week, the intense elaboration of a fitting interior design starts. During this design process, students are stimulated to collect additional information (e.g. photographs, individual interviews, policy documents, plans, sketches and observations). As such, the students mainly decide themselves how the initially triggered awareness could or should further develop. By giving them enough freedom to act, the teaching staff wants to stimulate a kind of self-managed exploration process that further improves their individual societal awareness. In order to achieve this goal, the staff members give intermediary feedback information on a weekly basis. So the interior design process becomes very interactive.

The practical organization of the design assignment is different for each year. In the first year, the students are divided in groups of four. In the process, the teaching staff tries to improve the societal awareness building by maximizing group interaction. In the second year, however, the students complete the assignment individually. The motivation of the teaching staff to change the initial formula is (i) to give more facilities for an individualized societal awareness building (i.e. personal interpretations and point of views) and (ii) to increase the motivation to experiment and be (more) creative (i.e. no limits of consensus-building within the group) as a result.

A Confronting and Reflective Evaluation Phase

At the end of June, the design assignments are finalized. To present and defend their interior design, the students are asked to use different presentation techniques common within the profession of interior architecture (e.g. an oral discourse documented by plans, renderings, sketches, a scale model and mood boards with colour schemes and samples of materials). This presentation is then

evaluated by a mixed jury consisting of (i) all four members of the teaching staff, (ii) four additional colleagues or experts in interior architecture and (iii) four external representatives of the respective public libraries involved. By using the external representatives, the teaching staff wants to confront the students once again with additional information on the accuracy and usefulness of their elaborated design. As such, a last moment of intense reflection and societal awareness building takes place.

To answer the central research question, *how can we trigger, develop and improve the societal context awareness of the interior students*, we had to compare their *ex-ante* (before the start of the assignment) with their *ex-post* (at the end of the assignment) societal context awareness. The next section elucidates the method used and the results.

5. UNRAVELLING THE *EX-ANTE* SOCIETAL CONTEXT AWARENESS OF THE STUDENTS

To discover the *ex-ante* societal context awareness of the students, various methods were used (see also 2). In the first year, the teaching staff only focused on informal *impressions* by means of short informal discussions and recorded reactions of the students during the kick-off week. In the second year, the teaching staff also wanted to collect information in a more systematic manner. Therefore a sample of 18 individual semi-structured interviews^{xi} was included after the finalization and public defence of the bachelor thesis output (see section Research Methodology, paragraph 3).

Reflecting on the specific nature of the *ex-ante* societal context awareness of the students, we can mention two interesting findings:

An Ambiguous Societal Context Awareness

According to the teaching staff, there clearly seems to exist a somewhat two-sided or ambiguous awareness story in both years. Thus, the students seem to be quite familiar with the general and traditional concept of the public library, for instance as a place to find books and information. It is interesting, however, to notice simultaneously that the students do not really know of other, new or changing images related to relevant societal challenges (e.g. a place for performance and 'creative making', a place for public encounter). Additionally, the students seem to be mainly – only? – fascinated by the modern, impressive and (re)new(ed) looks of public library buildings in comparison with the past. The link between these new, trendy interior designs and associated new societal challenges of public libraries, however, is not perceived and known by them. In short, the societal embedding of these new and changing interior designs is unfortunately missing.

In the second year, the in-depth interviews with 18 students clearly confirmed the mixed impressions of the teaching staff. As such, most students were quite familiar with the general concept of the public library before the assignment (e.g. 'as a child I

visited the public library in our village frequently'). But only two students were familiar with the more recent changes and innovations of Flemish public libraries. Admittedly, this concerned mainly innovations in respect to the building or interior spaces (e.g. a 'modernized façade', 'more tailor-made study facilities', 'the use of lively colours' and 'a place for encounter'). As such, the underlying changing identity and policy priorities were once again not noticed. When asked to describe important societal challenges that could be relevant to the design of future public libraries, nearly all 18 students confirmed they had no idea or information (e.g. 'I had no idea before the assignment' or 'sorry, but I was not really interested – I only thought them to be quite dull and unattractive places'). And finally, none of the 18 students knew the differences between a public library and, for instance, more specialized private libraries, like the university library (e.g. 'all these libraries are the same for me').

A Uniform View on Public Institutions

The teaching staff also emphasized the existence of a rather uniform or homogeneous societal context awareness: all public organizations are presently changing – read 'modernizing' – but the students seem to be unable to make clear distinctions between these public institutions. As such, all renewed spaces for these public institutions support, for instance, the residing and encountering needs of people, and all public institutions want to contribute to the learning society. Consequently, the particular societal context awareness of the Flemish public libraries seems to get lost in an overall public transition avalanche.

Analysing the answers of the 18 students in the second year once again confirmed the previously described experiences of the teaching staff. The students' notion of the specific features and societal challenges of Flemish public institutions is once again very general and vague (e.g. 'something is happening, but I do not really know what'). So their knowledge on differences among public institutions, let alone between public and private organizations, is very limited and even absent. This is somehow surprising, as over the last several decades the design of the public/urban interior has increasingly become a focus in interior education and practice (see also 1).

To conclude this section, we can say that the initial societal context awareness of the students in relation to the Flemish public libraries did already exist before the bachelor research project assignment, but that it was (very) limited, superficial and rather general or homogeneous in nature.

6. DEPICTING THE *EX-POST* SOCIETAL CONTEXT AWARENESS

Although the teaching staff assumed that the intense self-exploration and the repeated confrontation with additional in-depth information would alter the *ex-ante* societal context awareness during the design phase, this did not really happen, or only to a limited extent. The expected design-triggered 'wake-up call' is therefore small.

In the first year, the teaching staff noticed, for instance, that the central concepts as well as the further elaboration of specific target group needs were still formulated in general and even stereotypical ways. And, although the completed designs sometimes consisted of interesting, self-designed furniture and spaces (e.g. movable platforms, convertible chair-table constructions, transformed windowsills, separate cubic constructions that form additional 'rooms' for children to 'hide and seek'), the overall ideas were clearly too scarcely focused on the new ambitions of the case studies involved (e.g. inviting spaces for public encounter, cultural participation and creativity). Additionally, the completed designs were seldom original and inventive in nature (e.g. outspoken experiments with, for instance, materials, circulation and atmospheres). Even in the second year only a limited number of students really experimented with the innovative implications of the digital society, like gaming or e-spot zones and e-walls.

It is also interesting to mention that the teaching staff noticed in both years that most interior designs were too focused on the desires of their own student profile, being that of a middle-class, white adolescent (e.g. the lack of small toilets for children, the absence of lively colours to attract children, the installation of a very trendy Western design kitchen facility without considering non-Western preferences, the use of luxurious materials and impressive spaces that only invite trendy young urban citizens but not the elderly and multicultural inhabitants of a small, impoverished urban district). It clearly seemed to be very difficult for the students to put themselves in the position of the different target groups involved. They kept on considering themselves as the point of reference.

In view of the previously described remarks, the teaching staff is therefore somewhat disappointed in the results of both years. True, a few interior designs actually met the evaluation criteria of (i) a clear and consistent central concept; (ii) an explicit tailor-made elaboration (in light of the location, the target groups and the new ambitions involved); (iii) a well-considered selection of innovative, unique and/or original interior design aspects (e.g. in materials, circulation or atmosphere); and (iv) a well-documented and explicitly used set of inspiring references (e.g. ideas detected and/or observed in already existing and new public library projects). But no design completely matched the expectations or the initially specified demands of the public libraries in a convincing and satisfying way. Most representatives of the public libraries, however, emphasized that participating in the assignment juries did make them aware of the importance of interior design. For a public library expert, it is not self-evident to reflect on spatial and architectural features (e.g. 'I did not know that the traffic flow could be influenced in so many ways', 'interesting to see how the maker-space can be so different').

7. LOOKING FOR ENABLERS AND DISABLERS

Given the previous results, the teaching staff has reflected intensely on the possible causes of these partly surprising results. Why did the initial societal awareness of the

students change so little? What are the possible enablers or disablers of the triggered awareness?

Understanding a Complex and ‘Information-Flooded’ Society

At first the teaching staff considered the overestimation of the ease with which young people in general can discover and understand evolutions in their habitat. How consciously, in a detailed and differentiated way, can young people sense and thus comprehend our complex and ‘information-flooded’ society?

As suggested in the literature, an information overload – not least generated by the digital society – might activate a selective perception in order to master their young but ‘information-flooded’ lives (Waller, Huber and Glick, 1995; Beyer et al., 1997). This selective perception may explain why additional in-depth information during a period of six months does not really alter the initial images substantially. And it may also explain why the numerous interesting references of newly designed public libraries are only noticed in ‘quick glimpses’ but not taken further into account as long-lasting inspiration. In that sense the teaching staff might have expected too much of the concentrated kick-off phase (see section Gradually Stimulating Students).

When questioned, the 18 students emphasized different uses of information in order to cope with complex and new phenomena. As such, not all students, for instance, valued information ‘outside’ their proper discipline (e.g. ‘I’m an interior architect so I did not find the information given by library experts relevant. Too difficult to really understand’). Nor did all students acknowledge the utility of information to be ‘read’ (e.g. ‘as an interior architect I prefer visual information like photographs and pictures – I do not read texts; I find them difficult, so I do not read them’).

In light of the suggested overestimation of an easy-to-trigger knowledge of societal challenges in young people, a more limited and clearly distinctive information flow seems to be advisable. This may better trigger their societal context awareness, certainly if this would last long enough (more than six months) that a selective perception reflex is not activated. It might also be a good idea, for instance, for more assignments and/or courses in the curriculum to coincide and use the same carefully chosen set of information as the bachelor thesis.

Preferring Comfort Zones and Avoiding Uncertain Grounds

A second consideration of the teaching staff relates to the overestimation of the ease with which young people in general want to act independently, proactively and exploratively (see section An Interactive and Individual Design Phase). It is often speculated that students of design programmes are more creative than students of more traditional scientific programmes, but is that really the case? And how willing, keen and capable can young people, including interior architecture students, be to explore their complex and uncertain living environment?

As suggested in the literature, people tend to prefer and reside in safe, well-known comfort zones (Corbett, 2013; Molinsky, 2016). This so-called comfort-zone reflex may explain why the students were not that creative or innovative after all, and did not do more than what was formally assigned by the teaching staff. For instance, all four staff members noticed that the students always looked for the 'shortest, safest and easiest way' to design. They only used the 'safe' information given by the teaching staff and the public libraries involved. They rarely produced additional, self-planned observations or interviews, because these were not really framed and thus 'unsafe'. Additionally, the students focus intensively on the technical and material requirements of public libraries (e.g. length of bookshelves, available surface), and only to a limited extent on the perceptual and experience-related requirements (e.g. evoked fascination). Some quotes from the teaching staff illustrate these particular findings: 'Our students do not seem to understand that they certainly need to observe both locations and interview the target groups themselves, in order to know precisely what kind of scenography they should create by means of their interior designs.' Or: 'We clearly need to give them explicit orders to do this, and even then they seem to be very reluctant to do so – how come?!'

When interviewed, the 18 students in the second year seemed largely unaware of their comfort-zone reflex. According to them their completed designs were actually 'original' and 'innovative'. However, when asked to give the particular frame of reference for this conclusion, they could give none. So their conclusion of being original and innovative was an assumption, not an actually verified fact (e.g. 'we as interior architects are always creative – every design we make is creative'). Additionally, the students also admitted that they did not really collect in-depth information on the specific needs of target groups. They mainly used information on what they 'think' that target groups want (e.g. 'I do not have to ask it; I know what they want').

In relation to this comfort-zone reflex, the teaching staff was somewhat surprised that practically all 18 students automatically considered most information given by the public libraries involved 'correct' and 'objective'. The students clearly did not feel the need to check and double-check this information. Of course, questioning received information or looking for other, contradicting information automatically creates a kind of *discomfort* position.

Another aspect related to the comfort zone of interior architecture students is that they seemed to be more interested in the aesthetics of their designs than in the ethics. The authors suppose that the misrepresentation of the interior architecture profession on television shows and in popular design magazines influences our students and instils the still very ingrained idea that interior architecture is more about 'the pretty and luxurious' than 'the needed and the common'.

To remedy the comfort-zone reflex and the absence of a critical and ethical attitude, it might help to organize an intense (compulsory?) participative observation exercise within a public library, or use a team approach with students from another discipline (e.g. students of information and library sciences, sociology and anthropology). Another solution might be a (more) careful and well-considered formulation of the assignment itself. It might be interesting to focus less on the 'safe' technical, functional and material requirements and more on the 'unsafe' social, perceptive and experience-related requirements. Finally, it is also advisable that the teaching staff asks more explicitly for critical argumentations and references when commenting on the interior design in progress.

Copying Role Models Without Questioning Their Societal Context Awareness

Finally, the teaching staff emphasized the underestimation of blind copy-cat behaviour of young people. How willing, keen and capable can young people be to copy the thoughts and design behaviours of professional role models? And what if these role models themselves do not possess a considerable amount of societal context awareness?

According to the teaching staff it is clear that students who want to become interior architects are not only influenced by their curriculum or 'what is taught', but also by what they observe themselves in the design behaviour of teachers and famous interior professionals. This copy-cat behaviour may explain why the students did not relate societal challenges explicitly to the changing identity of Flemish public libraries or to their interior design. Most arguments used by the architects and interior architects to explain and account for their design are based on their individual reflections, desires and fascinations. How can we then expect interior students to behave otherwise and actually make an explicit societal or contextual link?

Examining the copy-cat behaviour of the 18 students revealed that, once again, they seemed to be unaware of this particular behaviour. However, some students emphasized that the teachers who mentor them in the design studios rarely talk about the underlying societal challenges of interior designs. Additionally, the students concluded that interior design journals seldom report on the underlying societal challenges of public library designs.^{xii}

In view of the copy-cat behaviour, the explicit use of and in-depth debates between students and their teachers about references and examples (i.e. of interesting public library buildings and the interior architects involved) would be advisable. Students should be reminded to consult, read and judge these interior design references for public libraries. And interior educators should communicate more explicitly why certain public library buildings and their interiors fit certain societal challenges or do not.

8. CONCLUSION

As explained in the introduction of this paper, in which we relate our aspirations to the overall theoretical ambitions and evolutions of the interior architecture discipline, there has been a growing consideration within the interior architecture academic community of the interaction between the societal context and the creation of interiors. In the process, the societal context awareness of future interior architects has become increasingly important over the last two decades. Our paper tries to contribute to this growing consideration by investigating whether and how the societal awareness of bachelor interior students can be improved.

Within the limitations of a bachelor thesis assignment, this paper shows that triggering the societal context awareness of Flemish interior architecture students is not obvious. Unfortunately, applying new educational practices (e.g. real-life case study assignments), organizing concentrated thematic workshops (e.g. kick-off week), inviting well-known academic experts, changing the assignment structure (e.g. a group versus an individual assignment) and demanding a critical reflection on the completed design is not enough. Based on an initial in-depth evaluation exercise, the triggering of the societal awareness competence within the design activities of the renewed bachelor thesis is presumably moderated by three phenomena or disablers: an activated selective perception, a dominant comfort-zone reflex and blind copy-cat behaviour. Admittedly, it needs to be emphasized that these conclusions stem mainly from the professional experiences and judgments of the teaching staff involved. Although these judgments were based on intensive informal talks and weekly coaching sessions with the group of approximately 60 students, the direct involvement of the interior architecture students themselves (i.e. by means of semi-structured interviews) was only realized in the second study. Based on the results of this initial assessment, both measures on the triggered societal awareness by the bachelor assignment were compatible and confirmed our overall findings.

In order to remedy or eliminate these 'disablers', additional interventions and adaptations of the bachelor thesis formula will be needed, as well as additional investigations. As such, gradually overcoming these disablers can be seen as the major future challenge of the teaching staff. On the one hand, this implies a more systemized and in-depth research into the precise nature of the disablers and enablers. On the other hand, the existence of other disablers throughout the entire renewed curriculum should also be explored. If we educators believe that the interior discipline has an ethical role to play, we must continue to invest throughout our curricula in the development of the societal skills/attitude/competences of our students, with the ultimate goal of instilling a societal context awareness. So a holistic and longitudinal approach of the renewed bachelor thesis seems to be advised.

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Notes

ⁱ By 'bachelor thesis' we mean the last design assignment at the end of the three-year bachelor programme. For this assignment, 12 weeks are provided in the curriculum.

ⁱⁱ In their article, Anderson, Honey and Dudek (2007) link the lack of professional recognition of interior design to the fact that interior design so far has been unable to demonstrate its societal commitment. The authors of this article support this analysis and presume that teaching societal awareness should be a focus in interior programmes to help to solve this problem.

ⁱⁱⁱ In this article we will use the term 'interior architecture' instead of, for instance, 'interior design', because in Belgium and in most other European countries this is the term most commonly used.

^{iv} Erin Cunningham borrowed the concept of 'interior design in context' from the legal discipline. She bases her insights on the work of legal historian Elisabeth Dale, who 'explores history's utility and place in the legal profession. Frustrated in her legal practice, Dale explains how she turned to the study of history to find a new way to look at and understand law. However, the traditional legal history narrative, which tended to isolate law, fell short of her expectations. She found that most historical accounts did not "embed law in social context" and "often treated legal issues and periods of time in isolation" while "non-legal histories" typically ignored the role of law in shaping the world.' (Cunningham, 2014, vi). Cunningham points out parallels between the legal and the interior design discipline.

^v The peer-reviewed *Interior Design/Interior Architecture Educators Association (IDEA) Journal* of 2015 was entirely dedicated to the subject of 'the interior and the urban'.

^{vi} These programmes are Architecture, Interior Architecture, Product Development, Heritage Studies, Urbanism and Spatial Planning and Conservation-Restoration.

^{vii} The Antwerp interior architecture programme consists of a three-year bachelor and a one-year master.

^{viii} By 'bachelor thesis' we mean the last design assignment at the end of the three-year bachelor programme. For this assignment, 12 weeks are provided in the curriculum.

^{ix} Dr. Inge Somers defended her PhD thesis, *Advancing Interiors: Interiorist voices on Identity Issues*, in September 2017.

^x University of Copenhagen (Dr Henrik Jochumsen, professor at the Royal School of Library and Information Science), Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Oslo (Dr Sunniva Evjen, associate professor on the Faculty of Social Science in the Department of Archivists, Library and Information Science), University of Applied Sciences HTW Chur, Switzerland (Daniel Walser, professor in the Department Lebensraum, Institut für Bauen im alpinen Raum) and Delft University of Technology (Dr Olindo Caso, professor on the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment).

^{xi} Initially 20 students responded to the invitation, but in the end two students did not come to the planned interview session.

^{xii} In this context, when speaking of interior design journals, students did not mean academic journals but the more popular design periodicals.