USER: ACTUALITY OR IMAGINARY?
The user as a valuable resource

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I   INTRODUCTION

Building and design have been interconnected for centuries.[1] Architects have been the creators of the human environment. However, the role of the architect has been questioned and diminished over the last decades.[2] As a result the architect has to fight for spatial and aesthetic quality in the project due to the increased strength of the commissioning party[3]. The architect needs space to connect to the essence of the assignment if he desires not to be reduced to a stylist but to be of important value for the design. The architect should be the one who facilitates the design to be build to the satisfaction of its users.[4]

This begs for a change in role for the architect and for the way we build. One where a satisfactory end result for the users is the main objective. That what is designed should be brought together with the way people live.[5] The architect should become the facilitator for this process. This requires a change in methodology. From the top-down design process, where the architect designs what he thinks is best for the users, towards a bottom-up process. A process where the user is included, to make building and using part of the same process.[6]

To include the user into the design process a specific method of research is required. Research methods have to be chosen deliberately to generate the desired results. This seems obvious, but is not always recognized during research. Consciously choosing a research method allows for validation of the research within its theoretical framework, making it possible to relate it to current architectural practice. By studying the praxis of architecture one can develop an eye for the actual users of building, and not the imagined ones.[7] Allowing for the user to be part of the design process in a valuable manner.

In the dwelling graduation studio there is an emphasis on designing for a specific target group. Creating a focal point for both the design and research. Focussing on a specific target groups provides an opportunity for qualitative research. Focusing on the subject in its context, in this case focussing on the user on the design site.
This raises the question: How to conduct architectural research which enables the actual user to influence the design process?

II   RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

The main method of research in the dwelling graduation studio is based on literature research. Centralizing the chosen target group and providing information on their view towards the built environment. However, there is a danger to this approach. A danger which is often neglected in architectural research i.e. researching and designing for the imagined user instead of the actual user. In this type of research, it is easy to generalize and simplify results to gain a more comprehensive target group for the design phase of the project.

An additional method of research is required to gain full comprehension of the target group one will design for. Fieldwork is a possible solution, because it focusses on the actual people of a project.[8] The value of fieldwork became evident during a studio workshop on the 'City at eye level'. During this workshop the students went into the city to study human behaviour, movement patterns and more subtle clues to the history and social interactions of a community by observing the actual user and the site. Also, a more structured method was applied, by interviewing the users about the

END NOTES:

[1] Thijs Asselbergs, "The New Architect: Integrating innovation into architectural assignments: in search of a new role" in *Delft Lectures on Architectural design,* (Delft: TuDelftpress, 2017), 296.
[2] Jonathan Hill, "The use of architects." in *Urban Studies* 38, no. 2 (2001): 351-365.
[3] Thijs Asselbergs, "The New Architect: Integrating innovation into architectural assignments: in search of a new role" in *Delft Lectures on Architectural design,* (Delft: TuDelftpress, 2017), 296.
[4] Thijs Asselbergs, "The New Architect" [presentation slides].
Retrieved from: https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2l/le/content/35525/viewContent/587704/View
[5] Richard Sennett, Building and dwelling: ethics for the city. (Penguin Random House UK, 2018.)
[6] Tom Avermaete, The architect and the Public: Empowering the People in Postwar Architecture Culture. in *Hunch no. 14 (2010):48-63.*
[7] Marieke Berkers, Praxeology [presentation slides]. *Lecture Series Research Methods. (Delft 2019). Retrieved from* https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2l/le/content/124944/viewContent/1274965/View
[8] Marieke Berkers, Praxeology [presentation slides]. *Lecture Series Research Methods. (Delft 2019). Retrieved from* https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2l/le/content/124944/viewContent/1274965/View

site, using a fixed set of questions. Both of these methods create a unique view of the site, compared to more traditional methods of research such as plan analysis or morphological studies.

This workshop was proved the value of researching the true user of a site. However, this was not my first experience with this method. It was already used during a MSc2 design project regarding elderly with dementia. At the time this type of research seemed to be an exception in the field of architecture. It was valuable to understand elderly with dementia, a target group where the designer can't easily relate to. To get a grip on the assignment as much insight into this target group as possible was needed. To gain knowledge into the way demented elderly live and what their life looks like. The students stayed for a weekend to observe how the elderly live. This allowed for the development of empathy towards their struggles, what could inform further research and design decisions. Living with the target group you design for was a unique experience and therefore it seemed this method was an exception. This workshop has demonstrated this method to be valuable in a more standard context.

Yet it also raises an important question. How to apply this method onto a site which is yet to be developed? Virtual Reality research was the solution in the case of the graduation studio. The ideas of the 'City at eye level' are also applicable on this virtual site. The person in this virtual world becomes the user. The chosen target group is modern families, the technology shows the world through the eyes of a child, because the technology allows them to be transformed into the desired user. A user who still provides insight into the social practice.

A disadvantage is, the user is still a fictional one. However, instead of presuming the architect knows best, the behaviour of this fictional user can be you observed and analysed providing more valuable results. The research could become more impartial by making the actual target group part of this virtual world, studying them in this yet to be developed neighbourhood. This could solve the paradox of the need for and lack of an actual user to research.

III   RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The public realm is changing. Tom Avermaete states a shift is occurring in the architectural practice. A shift in initiating, conceiving, developing and maintaining the architecture of a city. It is a breeding ground for co-productive and collaborative ventures. Ventures comprised by often complex groups of public and private actors and citizens.[9] These ventures have an active role for citizens, the future users of the development. They are a resource of co-creation, creating projects of value for all users. Projects like the Ceuvel in Amsterdam and the Luchtsingel in Rotterdam. Co-production is a trend on the housing market. Collective Private Commissioning (CPC) is increasingly popular. In this type of social practice the future user has an active roll in the architect led design process. Creating a process where the designer is able to empathise with the user, where he is the one guiding the design instead of imposing it on the future user.

Unfortunately, in our society the ethnographic approach is predominantly present. It has influenced the way we design and the way we do research. Creating a design process where research is reduced to generating facts and numbers on a design location and its users. Diminishing a target group to family composition, age group or other clichés. Instead of a social practice, where the user is centralized. Where their way of life and their core values are established and represented.

Co-production and the CPC are opposite approaches to this traditional attitude. Another recent development is the reinterpretation of the design atelier. These design ateliers, also known as charette studios in the USA and UK, focus on a solution oriented and collaborative approach involving a representative section of a communities stakeholders who are interested in this specific development.[10] Similar to Renzo Pianos mobile workshop as mentioned by Tom Avermaete.[11]

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[9] Tom Avermaete, Constructing the commons [presentation slides]. *Lecture series: Delft Lectures on Architectural Design. (Delft 2018). Retrieved from https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2l/le/content/35525/viewContent/580797/View*

[10] Lei Qu and Evert Hasselaar, eds. Making Room for People: Choice, voice and liveability in residential places. Techne Press, 2011.

[11] Tom Avermaete, The architect and the Public: Empowering the People in Postwar Architecture Culture. in *Hunch no. 14 (2010):48-63.*

Charette studios originate in the 19th century at the École des Beaux Arts, but have in recent years been reinterpreted in the (urban) design process.[12]

These ateliers bring together a variety of actors including the future users. This process provides an opportunity to gain insight into the people who inhabit a space and how they use it. This shows the shift from the ethnographic approach, in these ateliers the ideas and interests of the stakeholders are evaluated and incorporated into the design. By engaging the participants in multiple feedback loops a complete and feasible plan is developed over the course of the atelier, where the input of all participants is valued equally. One invaluable aspect of the design atelier is its location, the studio is situated on the actual design site. Providing the opportunity for the collaboration with the residents and granting first hand insight into the daily lives of the future user.[13] The interaction between the professional and the untrained resident convey new, inventive approaches breaking from the traditional top down planning approach in main stream architecture.

Reflecting these forms of social practice onto the graduation studio raises an important issue. Who is most important when designing for modern families, the parents or the children? One way to integrate the modern family into the design would be using the charette studio. However, this would only focus on part of the target group, the parent. The parent is able to participate in the design process and share their views and ideas regarding the wishes and needs in a dwelling for the modern family. This would exclude the child from the process reverting to designing for an imagined target group. A target group only talked about and thought of by outsiders. Introducing the children into the VR aspect in the charette studio allows for the designer to analyse the behaviour and movements of the child. Combining the observations from the parent in the charette studio and the child in VR into the design input. Providing first hand insight into the future user. One illustration this approach could work is the collaborative research of STIPO, the TU Delft and BFAS. They use VR to analyse what design aspects influence the behaviour of the user. Providing analytical information to underpin their observations creating a design which is proven to suit the future inhabitants.[14] Implementing this into a design with a varied target group, like modern families allows for their inclusion in the design process and creating a satisfactory end result.

IV   POSITIONING

As discussed in previous paragraphs the social practice is invaluable when researching a target group. Being able to understand the needs and wishes specific to them, without generalizing or over simplifying to fit the design scheme. However, question is how long do you have to study a group to understand it? When is an observation specific for a target group and when is it an outlier? Observation can indicate the problems, wishes and needs of a specific target group, but concrete personal interactions, like in a charette studio are needed to generate the best outcome. In this process the user should be seen as a valuable resource of inside knowledge and the architect as an invaluable guide towards a satisfying end result.

Implementing this method into a design studio proves difficult. As a result of the lack of a physical target group, the top down interpretation of the designer is ever present. In the dwelling studio the literature research performed was the basis for further exploration in virtual reality. Simulating the study of the actual user of the site, by putting people in the shoes of a child. Using the correct hight and providing them with complete freedom of movement allowed them to explore the neighbourhood freely, as if the user is a child. Showing how a child would experience the design and the different aspect one puts in. Observing the movement and what is looked at provides input for further research, but it mainly shows what is important for this user. Although the research subject is not really a child, providing them with the experience as if they were, minimizes how much the designer can project his

END NOTES:
[12] National Charette institute, The NCI Charette system (2011) retrieved from:
https://web.archive.org/web/20131126100645/http://www.charretteinstitute.org/charrette.html
[13] Bill Lennertz, The charrette as an agent for change. New Urbanism: Comprehensive Report & Best Practices Guide, 3rd edn. Ithaca, New Urban Publications 2003.
[14] Siënna Veelders, Virtual reality for a better city at eye level (2018) retrieved from: https://thecityateyelevel.com/news/virtual-reality-for-a-better-city-at-eye-level/

own view of the target group on the results. Making it more accurate is the fact that everyone was a child once, allowing them to empathize with the target group and their view on the world. It provided some interesting findings, because you literally see new things through the eyes of a child making different things seem important.

Understanding the real parent of a modern family provides more of challenge. The lack of an actual target group during this research has forced me to work in a more traditional way. Imposing the information gathered to literature research onto this target group. Abstracting their needs and wishes from a big sample, generalizing the results. This creates a bit of a paradox for me, because I can't accept the way research is done currently. It generalizes the wishes and needs of the target group and simplifies the people we design for. However, sometimes this seems the only possible way to do research. Especially if the research is pressured by time. It is easy to say all research should include a social practice. To get to know the real user, but it might prove difficult in reality. I do think in architectural practice the user should always be leading for the direction of the design. Of course, an architect is more skilled and knowledgeable, but he should use these skills to achieve the best result for the user, not for what will create the best image or what might be appreciated best by other designers. Because in the end the user has to live with that what is designed.

This method of research has made my own position on architecture and the way we do research abundantly clear to me. For me the real user should always be the core of the design and the research. VR provided me with an opportunity to partly use it in the research process for the graduation studio. I hope to use it more extensively in the remaining parts of graduation, to become more precise about who I design for, what they want and need in a building. For now it has provided a basis to start from and a methodology to continue with for the future.

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