

COMMUNITY CONSCIOUS ADAPTIVE REUSE

Potential of praxeological research to inform rehabilitation of built heritage

Dominik Gomółka

4744993

The responsible practice of architecture demands acting in an informed manner. To ensure that as a designer I do not remain desensitized to an important aspect of the context requires that I first grasp the general overview of it and then gather specific knowledge on the topics relevant for the certain architectural task. Here the choice of the adequate tools of gathering knowledge- or heuristic techniques- becomes critical, as it will determine how I will investigate these important aspects of the context to form the core of my design approach. Is it then possible to select “the right set” of heuristic techniques to ensure all the important ingredients would be investigated in sufficient depth, so that I would be able to find their role in the design? I think it is to a large extent a matter of sensitivity and alertness to the nuances of each individual design assignment. Rather than following the pre-established frameworks of conducting architectural research I opt for customizing the apparatus of gaining knowledge to ensure the research remains design oriented and useful for the future work.

The Lecture Series of Research Methods reaffirmed my believe in possibilities of generating architectural knowledge independently. The variety of inquiry methods presented in the series- of which so many were based not necessarily on existing written sources- strengthened my self-confidence as an active researcher and reassured me that in fact I too can create the necessary body of knowledge. The lecture of Klaske Havik was an inspiration for me as she has introduced the phenomenological approach to architecture and ways of “reading” it through the lense of sensory perception, imagination and lived experience. This was particularly helpful to me because literature on my thesis subject is scarce and I needed to develop alternative tools of understanding the building. Lecture of Marieke Berkers on praxeology was just as inspiring- the observation, photography, interviews and participation- being in the place, using it and spending time in it- have become my new apparatus of gaining knowledge on the object which I am going to transform in my graduation project.

The main theme of my graduation studio is the “Tomorrow’s Heritage” and it is embedded in relatively new province of Flevoland. Specific topic of my project is the refurbishment and adaptation of Lelycentre- the modernist pioneer neighborhood in the new city of Lelystad, built from scratch in the 60’s and 70’s. Unfortunately the city has never reached its envisioned image of ideal city of modernism. As a result of restructuration the neighborhood of Lelycentre has turned from the center of the new town to a marginal and derelict district, slowly succumbing to neglect. The influx of lower income groups, aging of the pioneer generation and emigration of the youth due to lack of employment and education opportunities form a very fragile social situation. Unlike the problem of vacancy or preservation and re-use of culturally important buildings, which is usually a concern of Heritage and Architecture studio, in this assignment tackling the social problems seems of greater importance. The history of the Lelycentre is happening now and adapting the neighborhood to the condition of changing population and the declining post-new town centre is the primary goal. The project demands a strong focus on empowering the local community, reviving the economy in small scale and re-establishing now unclear role of the former centre in the scale of the city. My research question is then how the study of the daily life practices, behavior and needs of the inhabitants and visitors can inform to the adaptation strategy which would foster the local community and mitigate the risk of further marginalization and decline of this derelict district.

I decided to convey the study of the neighborhood life next to the methodology proposed in Heritage and Architecture studio. As myself and my studio group learnt more about the site of intervention, we started to notice that the historical research and value assessment were not sufficient to answer the problems of the degrading neighborhood. Not only due to the lack of sources documenting this young heritage site, but also because of the nature of the problems this place is struggling with. Already during the common analysis we introduced interviews with the residents to get

to know their perspective: what do they appreciate about the place, what do they miss, do they feel attached to their surrounding, what parts of it they dislike and avoid? We wanted to gain the point of view based on the daily life and practices of the people in this environment. In fact because of the extended period of time we spent in the site during the multiple visits we also became its users ourselves. Lucas describes this form of research as user participation and one of the qualitative research methodologies¹. Another method I used to investigate the interaction and bond between people and place was the use of photography. In my photographs I tried to capture how the shopping centre is used, what spaces are occupied and adapted as common. In relation to the lecture series I define my research methodology as praxeological. The use of interviews and experiencing the neighborhood on my own helped me to choose the particular place for the meaningful intervention in the area- the degrading shopping mall "Lelycentre" which used to be the center of social life for the pioneers. The approach I adopted during the research has helped me to develop the sensitivity to the inhabitants and users of Lelycentre, recognize the dynamics of the neighborhood life and notice potential of this sub-urban setting.

As a source of general knowledge about research methodologies and basis for my research design I used the recommended literature: "*Research Methods for Architecture*" by Ray Lucas. To start using photography in more structured and productive way I sought guidance in "*Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*" by John and Malcolm Collier. The authors propose an extensive advice on possible focus points during the survey aimed to obtain specific information and how to systematically interpret the gathered material. Although we prepared for the first interviews intuitively composing the list of questions, without consulting any literature about a specific method, Robert S. Weiss's "*Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*" will be helpful to improve this in the future. To gain theoretical base on the bond of people and surrounding I used "*Topophilia*" by Yi-Fu Tuan. The article "*Keeping the Existing: Lina Bo Bardi's Upcycling and Urban Renewal Strategies*" describing the works of the Italian architect in the field of rehabilitation of the heritage site with the benefit for the local communities were of great support for developing my architectural position, as well as the works of Tom Avermaete and other researchers of the Chair of Methods and Analysis in the topic of "the commons". Finally- I found the book "*Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*" a true source of inspirations and fresh ideas, it helped me to position my voice amongst the many.

The way knowledge on user behavior in the environment informs the architectural design changed over time. To keep the comparison relevant to my thesis topic I will go back not further than times after the post-war modernism. I will also discuss the emerging new tendencies which I found inspiring for my current work.

Tom Avermaete argues that the notion of public interaction with in built environment is not stiffly defined, but rather is a subject of re-interpretation by architects². Each formulates this relation anew- which translates to how the inclusion of user shapes the design approaches. The architects of modern movement studied the ergonomics and behavioral sciences, they intended to create the functional environment based on the needs of the human. With all the declared care for the public, the user was treated as passive and in rather authoritative way, as Jonathan Hill presents it in his article, while it is the architects who play the role of the "form-givers, creators and controllers of human environments"³.

Avermaete then names the groups of architects-populists and architects-activists. The first- originated in the 1950s and 1960s and included Venturi and Scott-Brown. They argued that the basis for the architecture work would be the analysis and understanding of the mass culture with the patterns of environments it creates organically. The second followed in the 1970's, reacting to the rapid modernization of European cities. One representative example of this movement is the ARAU group in Brussels. The architects joined by sociologists organized public debates with the citizens concerned with the urban problems. Architects would then use their professional knowledge to inform and empower the local communities and develop so called counter-projects, aimed at retaining the quality of the pre-industrial city for the people.²

Even more interactive method was used later by Renzo Piano and Peter Rice with their Mobile Workshop project. In this small scale experiment the dialogue between the users, architects and professionals was established to plan the architectural interventions and work together to realize them. The user is positioned as the creative participator in the architectural endeavor. This empirical studies were further developed by John Turner in context of neighborhood design- he concluded that user participation in the complete process contributes to the greater architectural quality and value of freedom to shape one's own environment. ²

I find one particular regularity in these examples- the level of sensitivity of the survey methods applied by the architects demonstrates the rising tendency. The methodologies evolved from implementation of the science by modernists who studied the users but did not actively survey and consult them, towards the methods of inquiry involving dialogue and common experiments on site, dissolving the boundary between the educated professional and the passive user of the architecture. Tom Avermaete draws similar conclusion: "[...] different approaches describe the contours of a new professional figure, who is not an exclusive artistic genius serving a private client but rather an inclusive engaged architect playing a public role." ². I interpret this opinion as part of the larger new theory described by the professors of the Chair of Methods and Analysis as "the commons". The idea of the commons stems from the position that the city should be regarded as the collective socio-cultural construct, a common resource which is shaped by and for the inhabitants³. Within that concept my initial question of how the daily practices and behavior of the people influence the adaptation of the built environment takes much deeper and fundamental meaning- city is what people make it and the every-day acts of adaptation and interpretation of the space as well as the larger acts of transformation in scale of the buildings are the life of this common realm and the society that dwells in it- "Communal resources and communal actions are brought together in the notion of the '*meent*' [common] and inextricably linked." ⁵

I decided to adopt the idea of "the commons" further in my research and graduation project to explore the potential of unlocking the public spaces in Lelycentre. Beyond this single project this concept resonates with my idea of adaptation of the built environment. To me thinking of the city as a common resource implies that we also recognize it as heritage- we did not start it- it was entrusted to us to make use of it.

In relation to the series of lectures I find the closest correlation between my research and the issues presented by Marieke Berkers. Praxeology can "develop an eye for the actual users of building, and not the imagined ones". She has introduced the point of view where the built environment can be described as the stage of everyday practice of its users. From the perspective of my research I perceive the acts of adaptation of the environment as these everyday practices- extended over different periods of time and having different degrees of permanence. Cumulatively these practices shape the cultural landscape of the neighborhood. Marieke Berkers illustrated that on the example of Casa Blanca neighborhood and the make-shift interventions which the residents did to alter their own dwellings. My position in research is that by the use of praxeology architect is able to read what needs and desires these practices express.

Observation and participation can help to gather the information which would be very difficult to obtain from the other sources. "Photographic comparisons can be a powerful measure of change, as when we take photographs of a place, subject, or activity from the past and put them together with photographs from the present" ⁶ – I was able to observe how intensively the building was exploited back in the days, how the demographic proportions of the population changed, how the culture of retail evolved. The benefit of the praxeological approach is that it makes the organic processes of change present in each community visible- and allows the architect to understand them and take an active and informed position in relation to them.

The ability to react to the changes in society proves to be vital for the adaptiveness of the cities. If the built environment is adaptive- or rather- our practice in it is adaptive, it's lifespan can be extended with the positive contribution to reduction of the waste by avoiding demolition. Resilient cities which can adapt to the changing dynamics, lifestyles, economical situations and demographic conditions are a relevant topic globally. Praxeological research has a role to play in the process of

urban renewal and adaptation. The Chair of Heritage and Architecture uses a very specified methodology of research mainly based in material culture and history. This Methodology preassumes that the investigated object is of high value and its transformation, reuse or adaptation strategy can be based on the value assessment, while it is not always the case- especially in case of the very young heritage sites. This calls for alternative strategies of research aimed to find other values which would support the adaptation of the building and allow it to play its role long enough to be appreciated and recognized as culturally important. The role which the building plays in the life of community can be such a value and praxeology can help to discover this value.

Lina Bo Bardi's project of SESC Pompéia adaptive re-use was an intervention on the object already actively used by the local community. "What we want is precisely to maintain and amplify, what we found here, nothing more"⁷ she has noted when she has seen that a former factory was already in informal use as a place of leisure and togetherness. I am convinced that this sensitivity, humbleness and empathy to the users could contribute to creation of more inclusive, dignifying and welcoming common realm, and my experiment with praxeology has thought me how to keep my eyes opened for that opportunity.

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