

PHENOMONOLOGY IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

A reflection on Historical Research

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I INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to critically reflect on the methodology and research method used in the preliminary research of the Heritage & Architecture design studio Revitalising Heritage – Winterswijk. Research plays a major role in the Heritage & Design studio and continues to play a major role during the design process, as it forms the starting point for the program, design concept and choices made throughout the elaboration of the design. Research and design are not two separate practices, but fundamentally connected and interdependent¹.

The Heritage & Design studio evolves around the village of Winterswijk. The focus of this studio is on the preservation of built monumental heritage, in which I will be specifically focusing on the Jacobus church. In the mid-sixties a huge outflow of churchgoers started, which is still an ongoing process. As a result, church buildings became empty and many times this led to demolition. The challenge is to find a new purpose for this building when in the future it will lose its function as a church. The Heritage & Architecture studio is structured in such a way that first a joint research is done, which will form the starting point for the design. A specific aspect of the church is that it consists of different layers of time. Therefore, we analyzed the changes that were made to the church over time and searched for the reasons why these changes happened.

A method is a manner or mode of procedure, a systematical way of working to achieve results. Methodology is the research of scientific methods. It doesn't provide solutions, as methods do, but helps understanding which method or set of methods can be applied to acquire knowledge and to advance science². During the course, I was mostly inspired by the lecture of Klaske Havik about phenomenology, in which she argued that architecture students are thought mainly by images while architectural understanding goes beyond images and includes other senses³. This is a statement that I agree with and noticed throughout my studies. She showed ways of capturing the experience of place in text or images, which I found very inspiring.

In this paper, the focus is specifically on the primary method used during the joint research, which is Historical research. Instead of focusing on one design problem, Historical research is very broad, researching every aspect of the building. One of these aspects is the Spirit of Place, which refers to the unique, distinctive and cherished aspects of a place⁶. It has to do with both tangible physical aspects of a place, such as material, light and proportion, as well as intangible and cultural aspects, such as memories. It is vague, personal and hard to capture in text or design, which may be the reason why it remains largely unaddressed in architecture. The question asked in this essay is how to research this Spirit of Place and what its importance is in Historical research. Because of the way the research in the Heritage & Design studio is structured, in my opinion there is not yet enough emphasis on the Spirit of Place. There is no specific method yet developed to capture observations of the Spirit of Place in a systematic way, which makes it hard to analyze. In this essay, literature and a couple of examples are mentioned illustrating how to research the Spirit of Place, which can be helpful in the further research during the design process.

¹ Wessel de Jonge, Methodology of Architectural Re-Use (class lecture, Heritage and Architecture: Methodologies of Architectural Reuse, Delft University of Technology, Delft, October 22, 2018).

² Jorge Mejía, Methods of architectural exploration, evaluation and discovery (class lecture, Lecture Series Research Methods, Delft University of Technology, Delft, September 5, 2019)

³ Klaske Havik, Phenomenology, architectural perception and (literary) methods (class lecture, Lecture Series Research Methods, Delft University of Technology, Delft, September 19, 2019)

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

In the book “Architectural Research Methods” seven research methods are identified⁴. The method that I will elaborate on is Historical research, which concerns the theoretical part of my research. Historical research is based on facts, which then are interpreted by the researcher. It entails fact finding, fact evaluation, fact organization and fact analysis. To structure the research, Stewart Brand’s shearing layers of change were used⁵. This is a framework that is adopted by the chair of Heritage & Design to structure an analysis of the tangible layers of a building⁶. To construct an observation of a building in a coherent manner, it is important to work in a systematic way. Kuipers⁶ makes the comparison with a medical anamnesis, in which a specific series of questions guides the physical examination of a patient. There are several tactics and tools in doing Historical research, of which a number are shown in figure 2.

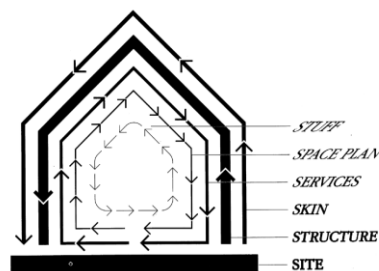


Fig. 1: Brand's shearing layers of change⁵.



Fig. 2: Diagram of the Anamnesis process and tools⁶.

Besides the tangible aspects of the building, an important part of this research was the experience of the space, as this is very specific in church buildings. Kuipers and de Jonge⁶ suggest adding a seventh layer to the shearing layers of change, the Spirit of Place, which includes the intangible features of the place. The Spirit of Place is the most difficult to capture compared to the other layers, because it is mostly intangible and inexplicit. It is perceived through the human senses when on a site. Usually, a site visit is done at the start of the research and offers a personal experience of the place in its present state and in relation to its surrounding. The experience is time-bound and generated by the human senses, which makes it subjective⁶. To make the observation comparable to the process of anamnesis, tools such as shown in figure 2 can assist in directing the observation. Making sketches is one of the most important things to do during a site visit. According to architect Pallasmaa, drawing perspectives not only describes, but also conditions perception⁷. By making notes of the first impression, making sketches and taking photographs, a base can be made for further, more objective, documentation.

Kuipers⁶ writes that there is no specific method yet developed to capture observations of the Spirit of Place in a systematic way, which is both appropriate to architectural conservation and design. It is more complex than simply registering its specific characteristics. Each place consists of multiple identities and is experienced differently by different people. The Spirit of Place refers to a location's distinctive atmosphere. In his book “Atmospheres”, architect Peter Zumthor⁸ described nine elements that contribute to an atmosphere: The Body of Architecture, Material Compatibility, The Sound of a Space, The Temperature of a Space, Surrounding Objects, Between Composure and Seduction, Tension between Interior and Exterior, Levels of Intimacy and The Light on Things. These elements can be used to analyze the aspects of the atmosphere of the site or building.

⁴ Linda N. Groat and David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2002), 173-210.

⁵ Stewart Brand, *How buildings learn: What happens after they're built* (New York: Viking, 1994) 13.

⁶ Marieke Kuipers and Wessel de Jonge, *Designing from Heritage: Strategies for Conservation and Conversion* (Delft: TU Delft Library, 2017) 33-34.

⁷ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1996) 16.

⁸ Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres: Architectural environments, surrounding objects* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006) 18-61.

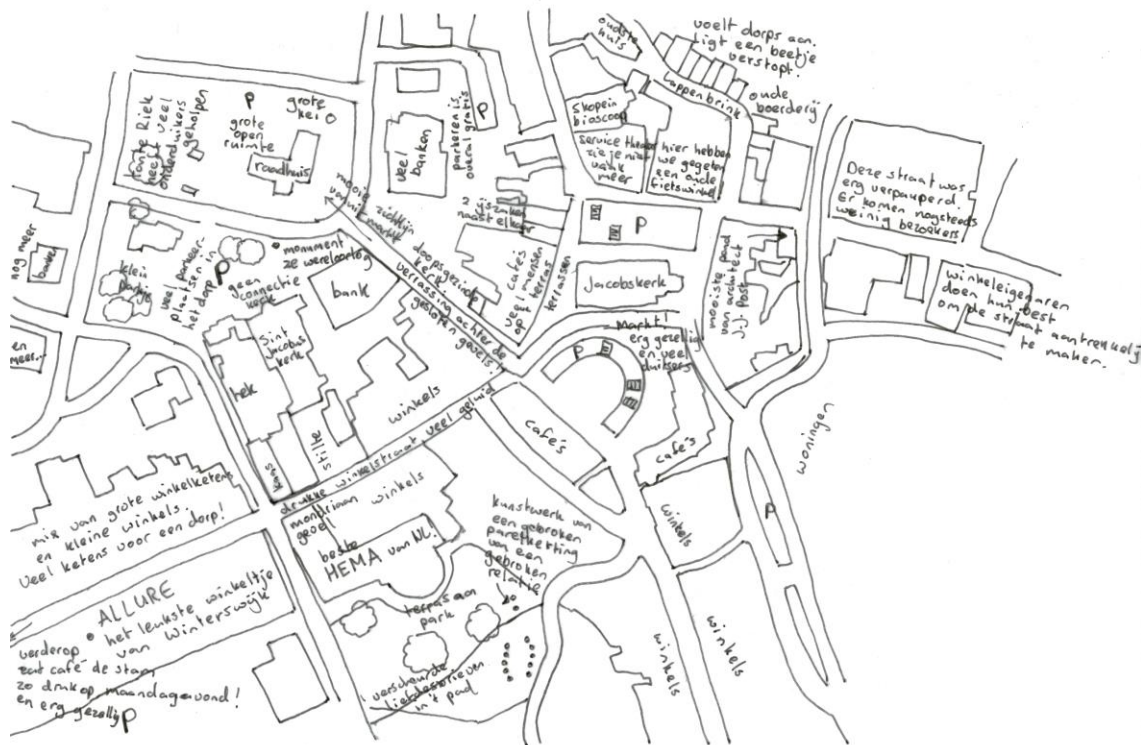


Fig. 3: Soft atlas of Winterswijk.

The result of Historical research is narrative. Klaske Havik³ defines narrative as “any account of connected events, presented to a reader or listener in a sequence of written or spoken words, or in a sequence of (moving) pictures”. It connects a series of events or activities in space and time. Literary methods can be used to address topics of perception. Figure 3 shows a Soft atlas, introduced by Jan Rothuizen⁹ in his book “The Soft Atlas of Amsterdam”, visualizing my first experience of Winterswijk. By noting what you see, think and feel, it produces a map that not only shows what is there, but also how you experiences the city. It can be applied on different scales. Figure 4 shows an inspiring example of a written postcard made to summarize the experience and personal perceptions of a site in Barendrecht, which reveals a new way, both literally and conceptually, of reading the site¹⁰. It would be valuable to explore literary methods, such as this example, more in further research and design.



Fig. 4: Barendrecht - sounds of the space. Postcard recollecting the journey across the landscape¹⁰.

⁹ Jan Rothuizen, *The Soft Atlas of Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam, 2018).

¹⁰ Kirsan van Haeren and Klaske Havik, "A Story of Three: A Narrative Approach to Reading Atmosphere and Making Place," *Spool. Journal of Architecture and the Built Environment*, no. 3 (2016): 5-24, <https://doi.org/10.7480/spool.2016.2.1137>

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

For a long time, history was only written about politics, economics and high art. It was believed that there was only objective truth in history, and that “methodologically controlled research made objective knowledge possible”¹¹. Historians assumed that with enough evidence, something like a single history of the world could be framed¹². The focus was solely on studying institutions like the state or the church. This attitude started to be criticized by historians in the 1960s, which led to a movement called the cultural turn. The approach of narrow political history changed to a wider range of social and cultural issues. From this shift, cultural studies emerged as a focus on history research and an active dialogue arose between anthropology and history¹². Subjects which were previously regarded as unfit for historical analysis became topics of study¹². For instance, the study of lower-class people or vernacular home interiors, focusing on all sorts of everyday artifacts, and more attention was paid to gender issues. Besides, or opposed to, what is captured in documents, the cultural turn values what is stored in memories and subjective aspects.

This change in approach introduced new methods and ways to analyze historical information. The cultural turn was a completely new way to look at the past and the ways of narrating evidence changed¹². It is possible to use the same source materials as before, but it is important to think critically upon the subject, by analyzing materials as to what the writer not only says but also implies and looking for gaps in logic and meaning. Histories may no longer be written as supposedly objective narratives but may include multiple strategies and voices of rhetoric¹². The cultural turn made way for other developments such as the spatial turn and the linguistic turn and topics such as anthropology and phenomenology in History research. This summary by no means covers the complete history of development that Historical research has undergone, but it shows that it is a method that keeps developing as culture is changing.

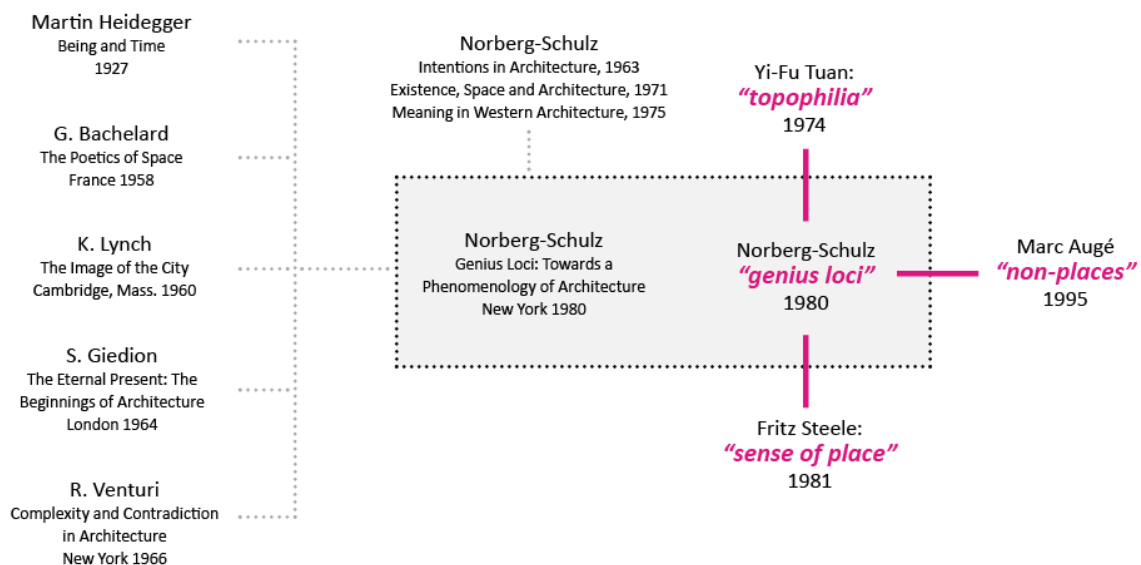


Fig. 5: Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture.¹³

¹¹ Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 2.

¹² Linda N. Groat and David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2002), 175-176.

¹³ Stela Popovic, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, May 8, 2015, accessed December 10, 2019 <https://stelapopovic.wordpress.com/category/theory/page/2/>.

Architectural phenomenology is a movement beginning in the 1950s, reaching a wide audience in the 1970s and 1980s. The foundation of the Spirit of Place, Genius Loci in Roman, was laid by Christian Norberg-Schulz in his book "Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture"¹⁴. His plea was to place more importance on the notion of place and to try to understand what the particular, sight specific, character of a place is. This book has been very influential; however, it must be noted that his work was very monocultural³. Nowadays, the assumption is that there is not one Spirit of Place, but multiple, because there are so many people with different backgrounds, experiencing spaces in different ways. Figure 5 shows an overview of literature related to Genius Loci. This literature will be studied but will not be discussed further due to length restrictions. Topo analysis is term theorist Gaston Bachelard defines as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives"¹⁵. It's not a neutral analysis of the place itself, but also of our intimate relationship to these spaces, as trying to understand personal stories connected to places plays an important part of the analysis. Examples of this are how spaces are experienced, remembered and lived, and how stories are connected to the place³. In the past decades there has been an absence of the notion of and interest in the Spirit of Place in architecture and the built environment. It still remains largely unaddressed in architecture while, in my opinion, it should play a big role. However, in recent years, it has become more present in the architecture discourse. In contemporary architecture practices there is a renewed search for atmosphere which can be seen for example in the work of Zumthor.

¹⁴ Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci: towards a phenomenology of architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1996).

¹⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The poetics of space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) 8.

IV POSITIONING

The question asked in the introduction of this essay was how to research this Spirit of Place and what its importance is in Historical research. In my opinion, the Spirit of Place plays a very important role in Historical research. It ensures that people can relate to their environment with a feeling of safety and satisfaction, which leads to a better quality of life. The demolition of heritage places and its distinctive atmosphere can sever the ties which people often have to their history and threaten the cultural values and traditions of the local built environment¹⁶. Even if a place is not valuable in terms of topics related to building type or function, a place might still have value because of its specificity and uniqueness.

The Heritage & Architecture studio is structured in such a way that first a joint research is done. In Historical research, a broad research is done on the building. On the one hand, the strength of this is that it gives a wider range of evidence than most other methods, it provides an alternative and richer source of information on topics and it permits the investigation of topics¹⁷. It might provide motives for the design that wouldn't have been imagined in advance. On the other hand, the research was very broad and too general on certain aspects, while other aspects were left out. As mentioned, Steward Brand's shearing layers of change were used to structure the research. These layers limit the research to the specific building and surrounding. For example, problems and opportunities in the city of Winterswijk were not included in this study, as well as research into the history of churches in general. The information that we gathered was specific for the building itself, but not geared at what I personally wanted to focus on and therefore didn't lead directly to forming a concept for the design. After doing more specific personal research into the history of churches, I found out that during the Middle Ages the church was a place with a lot of social activity, it was like an indoor public square. Based on this, I started researching the urban square and the way people experience public space. This became the starting point for the design concept and the new function of the building. This personal research was started after doing the joint research, because there was little time for this during the joint research. In my opinion, it would be better if there was a connection between the joint research and personal research.

Besides that, the group work was divided in such a way that each student worked on two or three of Brand's shearing layers of change, which means that I was focused on the research of only a part of the building. I personally worked on the topic of space plan, in which I geared at the experience of space as this is very important in churches and because of my personal fascination for the topic. In many ways this related to the Spirit of Place, as I tried to capture the physical elements which provide an uplifting or sublime experience in church buildings. However, since the Spirit of Place was treated in another chapter and researched by another student it wasn't my main focus. When looking back, the distinction between the different layers should not have been made so strictly.

There is no specific method yet developed to capture observations of the Spirit of Place in a systematic way, which makes it hard to analyze and therefore I think it was left behind in the joint research. In this essay, literature and a couple of examples are mentioned how to research the Spirit of Place, which can be helpful in the further research during the design process.

¹⁶ Bartosz Marek, *Heritage of Technology – Gdansk Outlook 4* (Gdansk: Technical University of Lodz, 2005) 7.

¹⁷ Linda N. Groat and David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2002), 210.

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