Jakob Norén - 5633028
Research Plan AR3A010

SPACES
ENGAGEMENT
PUBLIC REALM

A study into social contracts
shaped by architecture

Public Realm (definition): "*Those areas of urban settlements in which individuals in copresence tend to be personally unknown or only categorically know to one another.*"

- Lyn H. Lofland (1998)

When asked why designing for cities is so exhilarating to me, I find myself describing the richness of life that the city has to offer and how designing anything in a city is adding another layer to that richness. That is especially true for architecture in the public realm, which by nature becomes part of many individual narratives of people. The multiplicity of needs, wants, and ideas of the many individuals in a city allows for a diverse fabric of spaces, impressions, and meetings through which creative lives can be lived outside the home. At the same time, I've often felt that the lived city falls short of the envisioned one or the one I tend to describe. Some of the richness seems to be derived from an imagined city, one that does not yet exist. What is the unfulfilled potential of the public realm to enrich our lives?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In his book *The fall of Public Man*, sociologist Richard Sennett argues the thesis that public life and public space has become "*empty*", seemingly as a result of western society forgetting what the dichotomy of publicness and privateness actually entails. He develops the notion that our obsession with ourselves, with our identity and our single life-histories have lured us into a trap where the distinction of private and public have become blurred, leaving us puzzled in our relationship to the public realm. As the two worlds merge, our preoccupation with identity becomes a social issue, where we seem to reject the impersonal nature of public life in search for expressions of self in society. Sennet describes how this traps us in "*tyrannies of narcissism*" acting against the potential of publicness (Sennett, 1978).

"People are working out in terms of personal feelings public matters which properly can be dealt with only through codes of impersonal meaning" (Sennett, 1978)

He sees the need for humans to play out different public roles, claiming that it is the joy that we can draw from interacting through segmented, strictly public, versions of us, clearly separate from our private selves which has the potential of giving us rich and meaningful public lives (Sennett, 1978).

Marshall Berman, a contemporary of Sennet, seems to reject this notion of a lost public life, at least the way Sennet portrays it. He argues in *The politics of*

authenticity: radical individualism and the emergence of modern society that the ideal public realm is one where the individual is developed and expressed. He argues that the pursuit of authenticity is one of the hallmarks of modern life and that wearing masks and expressing and acting differently to what one "*truly feels*" is a barrier to leading an authentic life (Berman, 1970). In an article formulating a retort to Sennets "the fall of Public Man" he questions the idea of segmenting oneself into public and private selves claiming that, fundamentally, people become "*unwilling to suffer alone in silence*" and thus find a need to express their private selves within the public realm (Berman, 1977).

What do we actually want from the public realm? What do we need from it? How do we find ourselves, our own identity and meaning within the public realm and public space?

Joseph Bensman, professor of sociology at the City University of New York, investigates the idea of social roles extensively in his book *Between public and private: the lost boundaries of the self*. He claims, amongst other things, that each individual through their lifetime retains two different type of role situations: those expressing their intimate personal selves, and those expressing particular public, social, segmented selves. In essence, what can be understood from Bensman is the idea that through acting out different roles, be them public, intimate, or strictly private we essentially create our sense of self and our position in relation to our peers, society, and culture. Both Berman and Sennet, though arriving at somewhat different conclusions, seem to agree with this assumption. Bensman takes the idea further, describing how our environment can motivate us to seek privacy and to create separation with the public or to seek conformity with the public by expressing a curated self (Bensman, 1979). In other words, how and to what degree we partake in the public realm can be understood as a direct result of the degree to which the public realm is able to offer us space to express our strictly personal self, engage in acts of intimacy, and partake in publicness.

How can public space be structured to enable a rich public realm that entices us to participate in it? How can architecture contribute to spaces that engage us?

Segmented public selves allow clear distinction between the private and the public realm. This could both be a freeing and isolating experience (Source: own image)
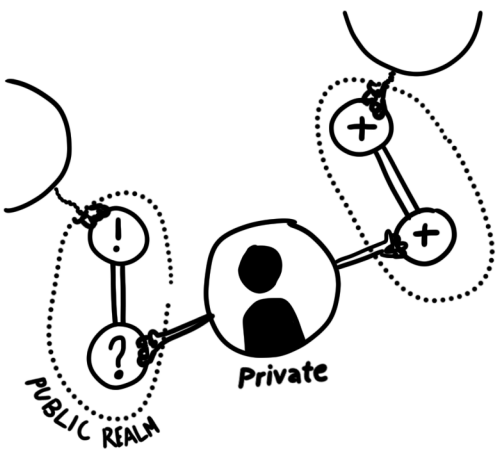
By striving for authenticity we look to express private selves within the public realm and in turn expect other to reveal a part of their own private sphere. (Source: own image)
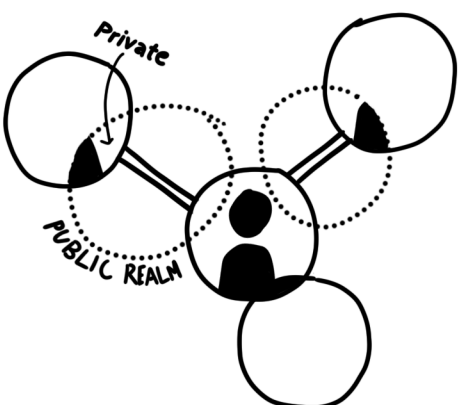
"The end of the commonly shared world has arrived when it is reduced to a single perspective and a single aspect"

-Hans Teerds (2008)

This is a quote from Hans Teerds in an article describing the ideas that philosopher Hannah Arendt accounts for in her book *The Human Condition*. The idea of the need for "*the simultaneity of countless perspectives*" is argued claiming it as the foundation of a rich public life. The notion of the amusement park arises as a footnote, which according to Teerds can be seen as a great example of public space that reduces the commonly shared world into a single perspective (Teerds, 2008). The amusement park is a meticulously manicured space in the public realm which positions the individual as a consumer of experiences. There's little room for you as an individual to create an experience other than the one devised for you. Everyone within the confines of this space is expected to experience more or less the same thing.

As a contrast to the amusement park, we could look at the festival camping as a space in the public realm. Though sharing several components with the amusement park, such as being a vast space with many visitors that's accessible only with a ticket, it is a space that clearly allows for (and is in fact dependant on) a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences. Anyone who has resided temporarily in such a place as the festival camping knows the rich public life that take place here. Individuals create their own shared spaces, their own private spheres and devise their own experience fully, interacting with each other in a multitude of ways and constellations. Next to nothing is articulated through physical space to control your experience, white lines in the grass commonly constitutes the only intervention. While the amusement park can be seen as a passive engagement of the individual with the public sphere, where the individual is expected to consume experiences the festival camping can be understood as an active engagement, putting responsibility on the individual to take part in creating the experience. The responsibility put on the individual to create the experience also opens up the opportunity to express and articulate private selves. Festival goers commonly feel freer to dress outside the norm, put up banners, paint messages on tents etc. The idea of passive contra active engagement seems closely linked to the ways in which the public realm is able to offer us space to express our personal self, engage in acts of intimacy, and partake in publicness.

Photo of Roskilde Festival from above. (Source: https://www.roskilde-festival.dk/en/years/2022/news/roskilde-festival-no-50/)

Photo of camping site at Roskilde Festival in Denmark. (Source: https://www.roskilde-festival.dk/en/)camping/staying-at-roskilde-festival/)

Photo of festival goers at Roskilde Festival. (Source: http://iwantomakeablogtoo.blogspot.com/2012_08_01_archive.html)

The case of the festival camping showcases the power of light borders as an intervention to stimulate active engagement. (Source: own image)
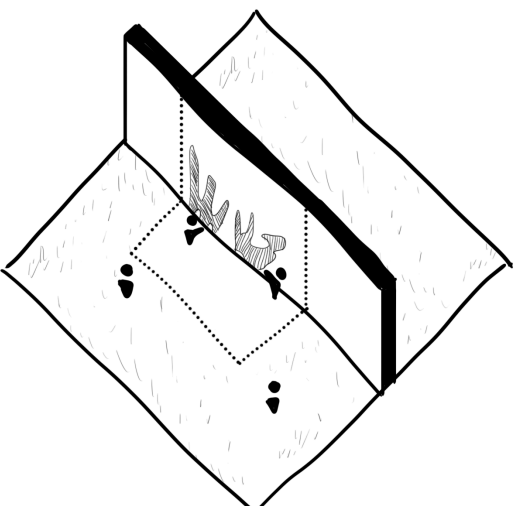
"Social contract arguments typically are that individuals have consented, either explicitly or tacitly, to surrender some of their freedoms (...) in exchange for protection of their remaining rights or maintenance of the social order."

- (Wikipedia)

RESEARCH AIM

Looking at this dichotomy of passive and active engagement it seems clear also that the built environment plays a part in formulating the social contracts that control our behaviour and freedoms within the public realm. *How can these spatial controls be understood and utilised? Can we through architecture manage and even design these social contracts with some precision to create spaces in our cities that allows the individual the opportunity to engage with publicness in a greater multitude of ways*? The aim of this research is to investigate these questions. How does architecture influence behaviour? How does architecture influence how individuals position themselves in the public realm in relation to others? How do spaces affect how the individual chooses to expresses him/herself?

STUDY CASE - BUDAPEST

The modern history of Budapest, and Hungary as a whole, offers a complex relationship to public and private dichotomies and public and private lives. Quick and substantial changes in degrees of state ownership and privatisation have caused a nesting of ownership and governing issues making coherency over public, private, and co-operative forces difficult (Kiss, 2019). This has had a very visible effect on the urban fabric where facades of urban blocks fall into despair due to lack of defined responsibility and allocations of funds among homeowners. Simultaneously, Budapest is a city famous for its metropolitan life, being a popular tourist attraction with a diverse set of functions on offer. It's often advertised as a culturally rich city, famous for music, theatre, and bathing culture, as well as a vivid nightlife.

However, Budapest can also be interpreted as a place where publicness is at risk of becoming one-dimensional. Though this problem might not be unique to Budapest, it can be interpreted through reading contemporary planning and architecture efforts in the capital city. An example is the Városliget park, the city's largest and arguably most important green space. Plans for this park are grand, structuring an extensive cultural cluster within it where museums, amusement parks, zoos, biodomes, cafés and baths are placed in a link of greenery. Martha Thorne, the

former director of the Pritzker Prize, described the project in the following words:

"The cultural developments implemented within the framework of the Liget Project represent a new model for the modern city, as the complex cultural spaces and programs, complemented by contemporary architectural masterpieces, create the liveability of the cities of the future." (BORS, 2022)

Though these words of praise seem promising, one can question what kind of public realm the area constitutes. News agency *Hungary Today* brings this up partially in a discussion about divided opinions on the park. Here the voice of critics highlights the idea that the cultivation of a new museum cluster changes the character of the park, destroying some of its unique qualities, seemingly in favour of intense cultural experiences that the individual can consume (Velkey, 2018).

Just west of the Városliget park is Nyugati station, an area about to undergo extensive transformation. Huge infrastructure development efforts will increase the node value at the station area, and availability of large open plots around it offer the potential for a diverse and rich public life to develop at this node. However, ownership issues as well as disagreements on how to utilise state owned land and vacated station buildings runs the risk of rendering this area one-dimensional in favour of high commercial intensity.

Through design research the project aims at addressing these urgencies through a conceptual understanding as well as an understanding of the context of the city. By mapping and analysing different space types (parks, squares, markets, community buildings etc) within the public realm of Budapest the research aims at connecting the conceptual study to the real-life urban scenarios of the city. How does the spatial configuration, materials, degrees of formality, degree of programming, openness contra confinement etc affect the perceived social contracts and the actual use of different spaces in the city? Are there strategies or phenomenon specific to Budapest that can be replicated? Can strategies or spatial elements be implemented that are not found in the city today? How can devised strategies mitigate one-sided development in the city in favour of multiplicity?

VÁROSLIGET

NYUGATI

Map of Budapest, scale 1:100 000
(Source: own image)

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Jakob Norén

Photo of the new House of Music by Fojimoto Architects. A new addition to Városliget. (Source: own photo)

Photo of urban plaza on top of the newly opened Museum of Ethnography. (Source: own photo)

The state owned empty plot next to Nyugati station.
(Source: own photo)

Westend Mall, situated in direct succession with
Nyugati Station on the west side of the train tracks.
(Source: own photo)

METHODOLOGY

The methodology is chosen and structured to simultaneously develop and test theories and methods. As described above, the research is centred around the theories of how architecture can influence our behaviour in the public realm and how, what and when we express personal selves within this domain. Part of this knowledge will be gained through literature, publications, and studies published on the topic, also with the intention to deepen the understanding of the implications of the research question as well as the larger questions such as *"What do we actually need from the public realm?"*. The main part of this knowledge however will be gathered through extensive study of architectural configurations, looking at examples of different design strategies that touch upon this subject, focusing on how and when they're implemented. The research will look at configurations from three points of view: 1) *Form* (typology), 2) *Material/Ornamentation* (semiology), and 3) *Context* (ecology). Studying how these configurations affect perceived behaviour and "social contracts" of the space conclusions will be drawn about design strategies.

Another part of the research is centred around the case city of Budapest, where these design strategies will be tested through design research. The project aims at ensuring, through this design research, that results are anchored in physical reality and specific contexts. Combined with the mapping of the public realm in the city and the contextual analysis where specific tensions, future development plans, spatial issues and current urgencies are investigated the idea is to highlight the specific potentials of implementing these design strategies in the context of Budapest. The contextual research will lead to the choice of a site which can be aided and also support the implementation of several design strategies. Ultimately, the testing of these design strategies at the site will lead to the development of a full-fledged architectural proposal.
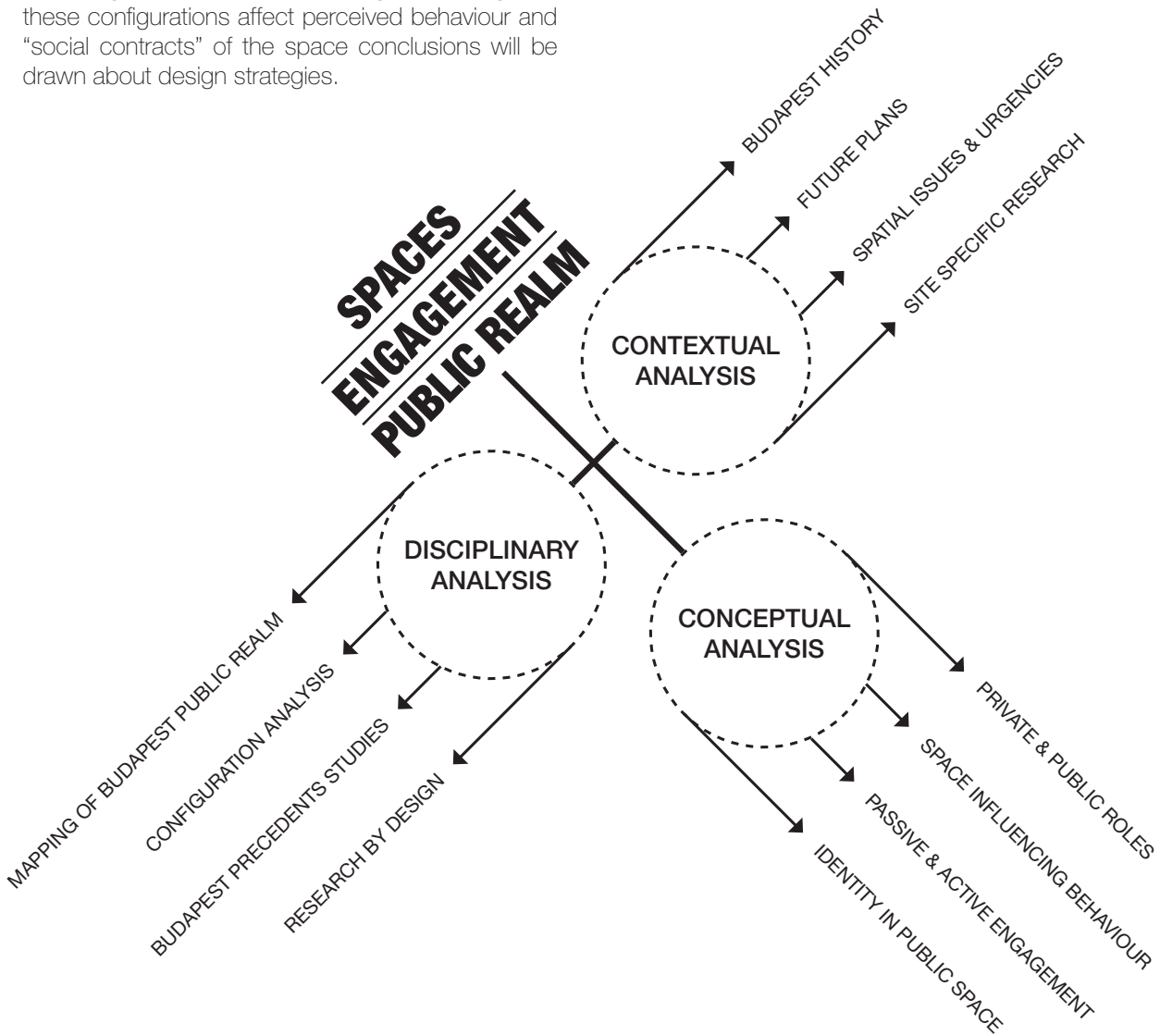

Diagram of research topics based on type of analysis method (Source: own image)
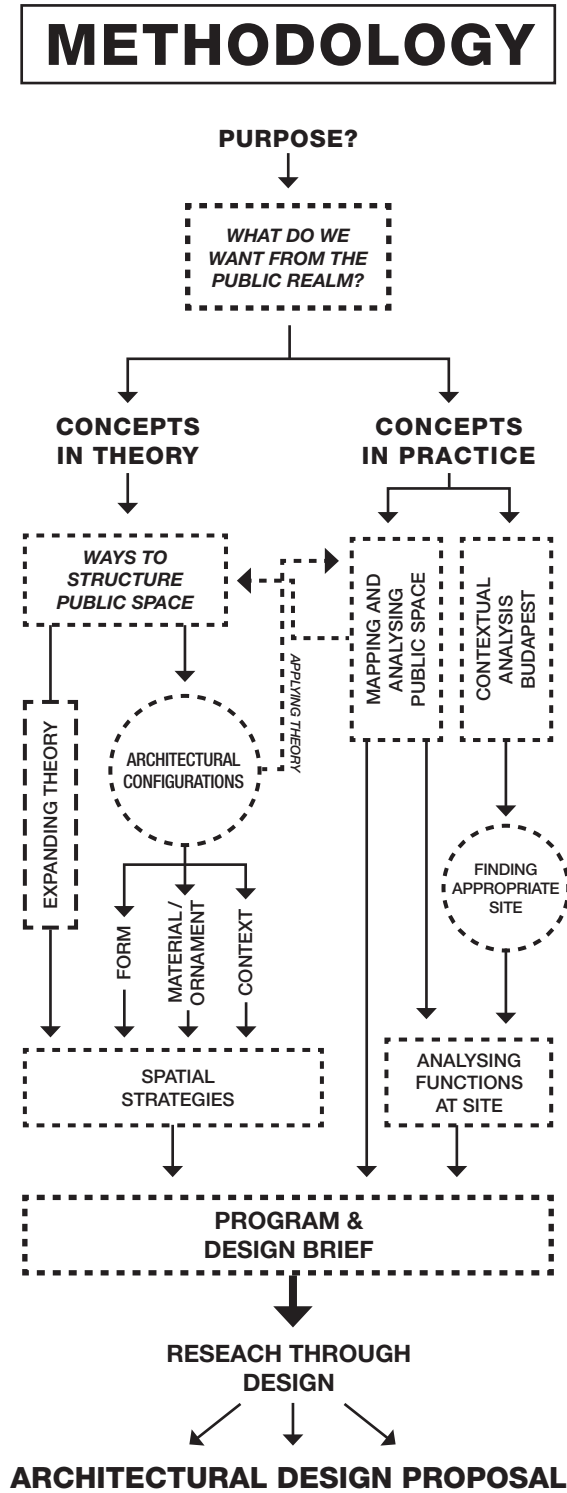
METHODOLOGY

PURPOSE?

WHAT DO WE WANT FROM THE PUBLIC REALM?

CONCEPTS IN THEORY

CONCEPTS IN PRACTICE

WAYS TO STRUCTURE PUBLIC SPACE

MAPPING AND ANALYSING PUBLIC SPACE

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS BUDAPEST

APPLYING THEORY

EXPANDING THEORY

ARCHITECTURAL CONFIGURATIONS

FINDING APPROPRIATE SITE

FORM

MATERIAL / ORNAMENT

CONTEXT

SPATIAL STRATEGIES

ANALYSING FUNCTIONS AT SITE

PROGRAM & DESIGN BRIEF

RESEACH THROUGH DESIGN

ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN PROPOSAL

Diagram of research activities and how they relate to each other sequentially (Source: own image)

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