THE STUDY OF PUBLIC SPACE, BETWEEN ETIC AND EMIC
Typologies of public space enriched by praxeological knowledge

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Thesis "The relationship between public space, built environment and human scale"

I   ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE: TODAY ATTITUDE

Nowadays, architecture is becoming an eye-catching art (and of course science) and its main goal is namely to catch the attention of the viewer, such as a client, a jury, or the public, and be self-explanatory in less than a glimpse of eye. At the roots of this trend is the more and more fast real estate market, plus the advent of the social media, since today architecture tries to be summarized with a series of pictures on the Instagram story, which after 24 hours will be already replaced by others. After my first work experience, I understood that part of the cause of this fast production of architecture is that most of the architectural profession is largely based on tenders and competitions, where architects receive all the "necessary" information about the site location, program, users and square meters, in order to immediately start with the project and massing volumes, because everything needs to be delivered after only six weeks.

Within this scenario, where time is money, it seems that there is no more place for research-methodological awareness within the practice. However, I strongly believe that the design process already starts with the research, and I highlight the necessity of a structured research method to explore the related topic. This because, the research is not a pre-fixed toolbox that an architect can use like a manual or a dictionary to achieve the general and superficial understanding of the project. On the contrary, a tailored research comes up from a precise methodological approach.

After this first basic understanding of the relationship between the research, the methodology of a research and the project itself, the *Research Methods Lecture Series* really helped me to go further, and to look from a new perspective those heuristic techniques that before I took for granted, while presenting also many new ones, and understanding that these come from a series of historical studies and evolutions. And so, I learned the meaning of a well-structured research supported by a well-defined research method. Within the series of lectures and the provided bibliography, I found very helpful and aligned to my personal interest and research the explanation of praxeology presented by Marieke Berkers and the broader notion on typology in the lecture of Robert Alexander Gorny.

To conclude my academic carrier, I chose to graduate within the chair of Complex Projects. Compared to other studios, the one of Complex Projects already presents a well-defined and pre-given research method, punctuated by precise guidelines. Indeed, the project and most of the researches are located in the fixed site location of 3.6km x 1.2km strip in the city center of Rotterdam. Within the main topic of "Migration" (of ideas) decided by the chair itself, my colleagues and I developed a group analysis of Rotterdam, looking first at the hard data and then at the soft ones. And so, with this *quantitative*[1] research, we collected data, produced maps, and made the 1:1000 site model. Beside this, we were also asked to investigate via a more *qualitative*[2] research the topic of "Migration", and so, for both the graduation studio and the related seminar of "City of Innovation", we started to explore our personal fascination, and here we had the chance to start to build our own research method.

So that, within this framework, I started to explore the thesis topic of the *"Migration of the idea of the use of the public space"*, with an eye on the global context, but contextualized in the testbed of Rotterdam, and more specifically I defined my research question as *"How is public space going to be reconsidered within the International character and the Highrise strategy of Rotterdam?"*. Doing so, the thesis will explore the relationship between the public space, the built environment, and the human scale, envisioning the future of the public space. So that, I started to think about what research method would suits the best my interest and thesis. Since my main fascination was the study of the use of the public space, I defined my research-methodological question as *"How to frame the study of the public space within a dual point of view?"*, this because I saw the necessity to combine both an etic and emic point of view.

II   THE SYNERGY BETWEEN TYPOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND PRAXEOLOGY KNOWLEDGE

My first ambition was to develop a research method from the *emic*[3] point of view, to understand the meaning of public space in the testbed of Rotterdam. My goal was to elaborate the research through sketches, photos, and interviews since the site location was easily reachable and there was the opportunity to have daily *fieldworks*[4]. However, due to global pandemic and my return to Italy, I had to re-frame my methodology towards a more *etic*[5] viewpoint.

Since the beginning of my research, it was important for me to understand the meaning of the Migration theme in relation to the use of the public space, and so, it has been relevant to explore the research both through the global and local scale of Rotterdam. According to these two fields of investigation and after the lecture series, the properly research method to explore my research question was a typological methodology but developed also within a praxeological epistemic framework. Moreover, I saw also the importance of the *"architectural production as a means for describing, theorizing and explaining"* [6], and in order to research and to express my findings I chose the media of the axonometric drawing and bidimensional mapping of those aspects that define the public space.

To understand the role of the public space within both the future densification of Rotterdam and the migration of the idea of the use of the public space, I decided to dissect the public space in all its shades, namely I looked at its *design components, use components and rules components* [7]. Doing so, I focused on a *context led research*, since I defined those relevant components of the public space for my research as subject of research.

Researching via types, *"as something that is permanent and complex, a logical principle that is prior to form and that constitutes it"* [8], of public spaces has been helpful to explore the meaning of the use of public space on both the global and local scale, providing a structured form of research, while revealing explicit differences. Doing so, on the global scale, I have been able to develop my own catalogue of types of public spaces, ranging from the Communism type of square of power, the metropolis one and monumental building squares, the British garden square, the Dutch market square and neighbourhood square, to the South European type of squares as Heart of the city [9], and several others, while at the local scale, I referred to the current developments of the public space in Rotterdam, analysing also other types, such as the community public spaces, as playgrounds, educational gardens, urban agriculture spaces and social rooftops.
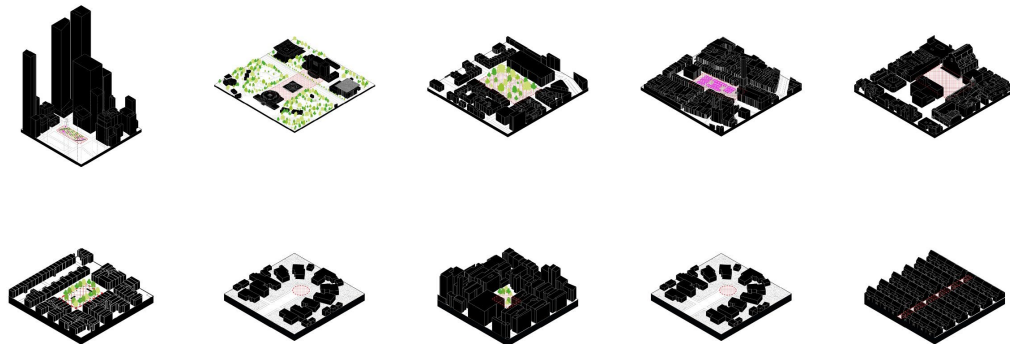

Figure 1. Typologies of public spaces the global scale (author Gabriele Piazzo)

However, to gain a more meaningful and deeper outcome for my research, I had to understand and study also the actual *use components and rules components* of those spaces [10] and I developed further this part of my research in the seminar course City of Innovation. Indeed, my etic viewpoint started to shift towards a more emic perspective, and so my typological approach became influenced by the epistemic framework of praxeology. This because, I critically recognise the limitations of the solely use of a typological methodology related to my research question, while also the users and the experience of the place were important to me.

Still via mappings and axonometric drawings, I explored the topic of migration of different types of development and management of the public space, within the international context of America, Europe and Asia, drawing different inhabitations of the public space between different *methods of partnership among public, private and community actors* [11]. However, the goal of this part of my research was not to draw a *quantitative and comparative methodology of the publicness* [12], but it was to achieve a broader and qualitative understanding of the different types of public spaces. So that, this praxeological knowledge has been researched to understand the differences of activities and responsibilities, determined by the combination of the specific use and goals of the public space, its

users and the qualitative elements present in the space, such as types of sitting, trees, grass, floorscape, flower, and art/sculpture, to capture what was the *atmosphere of the place*[13].
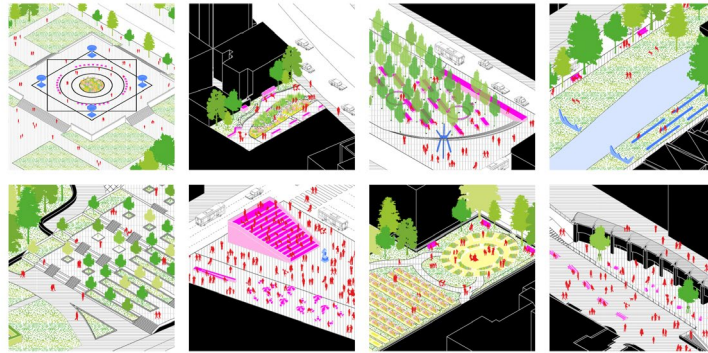

Figure 2. Atmosphere of the place (author Gabriele Piazzo)

III   FROM TYPOLOGICAL STUDIES TO BEHAVIOURAL ONES

According to my research approach, between etic and emic viewpoint, it was urgent to me to firstly understand the typological research and to frame it within the historical context, and secondly to explore those urbanist thoughts that started from the 60s to develop a more qualitative methodological approach to tackle the study and research of the public space.

As already explained in the previous chapter, the typological methods helped me to explain and develop my personal perspective concerning the topic of the migration, and so to study different types of public space both to the global and local scale.

The definition of typology and type has been (and still be) one of the main theoretical discussion of architecture and these are concepts that are also migrated through time and space as well. However, the first statement of the idea of type in architectural theory[14] dates back to the 1825 with Antoine Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, who made a clear distinction among the "model" and the "type", defining the latter as *"the idea of an element that serves as a rule for the model […] is something in relation to which different people may conceive works of art having no obvious resemblance to each other"* [15]. Moreover, for him, through the use of types, architecture was linked again to the past, namely the first time that the man encountered the problem of architecture and he identified it in a form[16.] The type was related to need and nature, namely the logic of form connected with the meaning and use[17].

However, during the 19th century, architectural manuals inverted the concept of the type of Quatremère, concerning more the "model" instead of the "type", moving the focus from the theory to the composition, namely the *"connection between form and program"* [18] as Moneo pointed out. Following this idea, here is placed the different point of view of Durand, who by means of his square grid and superimposition of axis, the architect was able to combine elements, and produce architecture organized by "genre" (function) and not type[19].

Moving further, the Modern movement rejected the type of the 19th, because it was perceived as an *"imposed restriction"* [20], and Gropius stated that it was possible to conceive new architecture without *"reference to prior examples"* [21]. Moreover, with the advent of the industrialization and the introduction of the mass-production, in the field of architecture, the word type became proto-type, pushed also by Le Corbusier and its *Dom-ino house* [22].

During the 60s, again a new meaning of the type was introduced, this time in relation to the study of the city. Remarkable was the work of Aldo Rossi, who highlighted the distinction between type and model of Quatremere de Quincy, and so that *"Typology is an element that plays its own role in constituting form; it is a constant"* [23]. Concluding, after these temporal evolutions of the idea of type, Moneo points out if today is still relevant to speak of type, and even if it is impossible to apply old definitions to new situations, it is a *"question that cannot be avoided",* and so that *"the question of type is to understand the nature of the architectural object today"* [24] . What emerges from this brief overview, is the difficulty of the finding of a final definition of type and typology, so among all the different thoughts, the one that helped me the most was the one of Aldo Rossi, *"as something that is*

permanent and complex, a logical principle that is prior to form and that constitutes it", described in his book *The architecture of the city* (1966), especially because he based his discourse of typology upon the relation with the city, and so helpful for my research on the study of different public spaces.

If the typological research methods has been helpful to understand the public space from a etic point of view, as explained before, I decided also to explore the other aspect of the public space, namely from the point of view of the users and the experience of the place. To develop this aspect of the public space, I relied my research on thinkers and urbanists that emerged from the second half of the 20th century, when the human perspective, as praxeology and phenomenology, became part of the Urbanisms field, and new heuristic tools were developed to study the interaction between public life and public space [25].

Among them, from the mid-50s, one of the first who explored this new field of research for the public space, has been Kevin Lynch, with his work published and described in the book *The image of the city*. Lynch introduced the concept of the *"mental map"*, where through a series of interviews, he studied how people perceived and orient themselves within their own city. He developed five elements to describe the city from a new perspective, such as *paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks* [26], which all together make what he calls the *Legibility* of the city [27].

In 1961, with the book *The concise Townscape*, Gordon Cullen developed a new heuristic tool, which he called *"Serial vision"* [28]. By doing so, he exploited sketches from the human perspective point of view, to explain intrinsic aspects of the city that surround the human being, and what is the relation between the man and the public space. Thanks to his lessons, I summarized what are the objective features of the public space that define the relationship between the built environment and the human scale.
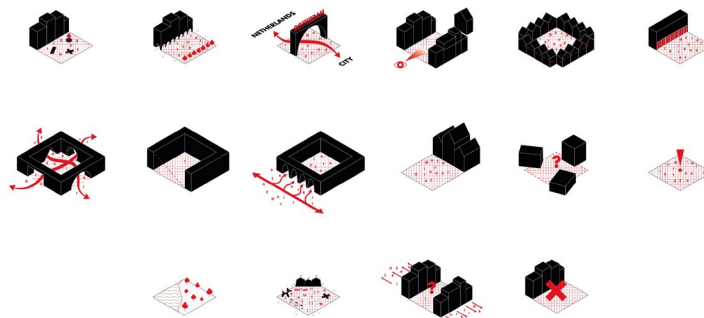

Figure 3. Objective features of the public space (author Gabriele Piazzo)

Another important work that developed further a method to explore the use of the public space, is the study made by William Whyte in New York. In the 1980, he published the result of his research in the book *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, where with the use of movies and notebooks, he objectively analysed the different behaviours of people in the public space, influenced by some elements, as such the sun, trees, sitting, water and food [28]. His lesson helped me to develop a catalogue of the elements of the use of the public space.
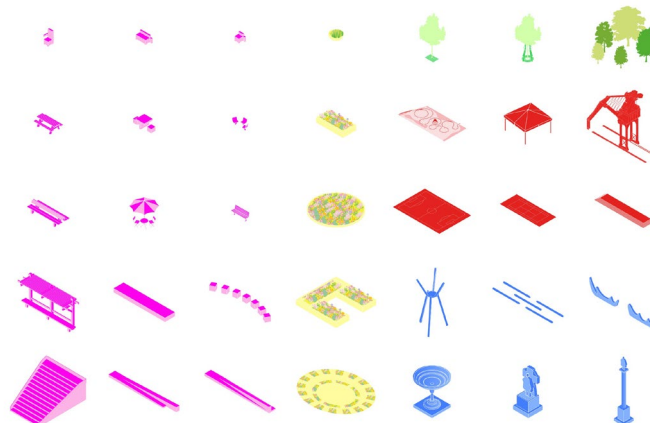

Figure 4. Elements of use of the public space (author Gabriele Piazzo)

Concluding, a contemporary example of research method for the study of the public space, which reflects on a typological method enriched by praxeological knowledge, which helped to define my research and approach, it is the method described by Manal Ahmad Al-Bishawi and Shadi Sami Ghadban[30]. This research method highlights the importance to analyse and combine both physical, cultural, and social aspects, while studying the public space. And so, to develop the research of the public space, it is important to dissect what are the *"design components"*, namely physical elements, considering the "spaces of the use, their physical layouts, boundaries, shape, location and objects"; the *"use components",* namely the social components, as the activities and the users of the space; and finally the *"rules components"*, taking in consideration "formal and informal rules that govern public spaces".

IV   HOW TO FIND THE REAL USER

As already mentioned in the first chapter, Complex Project's graduation studio is characterized by a well pre-defined and pre-given research method which helps the whole group to frame the research for the first phase of the graduation project, getting familiar with the site and collecting all the basic hard and soft data necessary to develop both the group vision and the own research question. However, concerning to this fixed scheme, I have to critically reflect on it. Indeed, I want to point out that relying my graduation research only onto the chair's research method, I will not broaden the horizon of my study, limiting the goal itself. That is why, I tried to investigate for my personal fascination exploiting also different epistemology. So that, I saw the combination of Complex Project's quantitative research method and my personal approach, based on both quantitative and qualitative research, as the correct method to explore the public space in different aspects.

As discussed before, to develop my research methodology according to my research question and the migration's theme, I based my approach on a typological methodology enriched by praxeological knowledge. This because, I recognized that in order to study the relationship between the public space, the built environment, and the human scale, it was important to dissect the public space in different aspects, such as the *design, use and rules components*. However, even if I tried to give a deeper meaning to my typological method, I investigated about the different users, activities, methods of development and management of the public space, mainly via books, articles, videos and images. Indeed, I have to critically reflect upon my own research method. This because, as the Marieke Berkers stated in her lecture about praxeology, when we do research, and we are "*studying the praxis of architecture one can develop an eye for the actual users of building, and not the imagined ones*". And so, since my research is not only based on Rotterdam, but I also studied public spaces in the rest of Europe, Asia and America, I couldn't (didn't) use methods of research based on phenomenology, first person observation of the place as interviews or visual ethnography, which would gave another level of depth to my emic approach and the outcomes of my research.

Finally, while deciding where and why to place my direction among all the presented different and valid research methodologies, and still related to Marieke Berkers's lecture, I recognize my individual position in the current discourse in the field of architecture and urbanism affine to the magistral lecture of Richard Sennett and its concept of the *Open City* [29]. What Sennett is looking and aiming for, is an architecture that takes in consideration the ideas of both the *ville*, as the real and physical context, and the *cité,* as the place of the collective life from the human perspective. Therefore, I saw the typological research able to investigate the ville, while the praxeological framework useful to explore those aspect of the public space concerning the cité, and so I tried to combine both an etic and emic point of view to explore my personal fascination of the use of the public space in relation to my research-methodological question. However, due to the global pandemic, but also partially due to pre-given methodology of my studio, I did not fully explore the cité, even if I theoretically had the opportunity, since the case study was the city of Rotterdam.

Concluding, during my work experience I found a lack of awareness of both the ville and the cité, especially concerning the latter, mainly because today, all the necessary information are enclosed in a design brief of a design competition, and the research it is almost skipped, starting immediately with the design, and so, also the relevance of a good research methods it seems no more prioritizing, unfortunately. On the contrary, I believe these are necessary to reach a certain degree of

quality, not about appearance or aesthetical, but concerned to the meaning and the purpose of architecture. Therefore, I found fundamental a course as *Research Methods Lecture Serie,* able to raise awareness about both the research and especially about the importance of the research methods itself, which are aspects that as Jorge Mejía explained in his lecture, continuously informs the design during its entire process, from the conceiving phase, to the last presentation.

END NOTES:

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6   Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 20.
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9   Josep Lluís Sert and Jaqueline Tyrwhitt and Ernesto Nathan Rogers, *CIAM8 The Heart of the City, Towards a Humanisation of Urban Life* (New York: Pellegrini and CuAahy Publishers, 1952)
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19   Sam Jacoby, "Typal and typological reasoning: a diagrammatic practice of architecture", in *The Journal of Architecture,* (2016), 939, DOI: 10.1080/13602365.2015.1116104
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26   Kevin Lynch, *The image of the city*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 49-90.
27   Kevin Lynch, *The image of the city*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 2.
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