THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CONTEXT
Understanding why social tendencies and practices are crucial for design

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I   INTRODUCTION

Research and design are fundamentally connected as two interdependent practices.[1] The continuous relation that exists between design and research differs in the discipline of Architecture when it is compared to other fields. Although design and research are understood as independent, both reveals many associations. "Design and research constitute neither polar opposites nor equivalent domains of activity. Rather, the relationship between the two is far more nuanced, complementary, and robust",[2] as stated by Groat and Wang. Students might not be completely aware of the relevance of understanding the various ways of doing and conscious of the numerous methodologies that are available to us. The lectures series helped me to improve the research developed during my Thesis in terms of opening a wide range of tools and helping me to understand epistemology and the schools of thoughts that support and involve the different methods normally use in architecture discipline. Epistemes exist on a wide spectrum, targeting different aspects of architectural research, being them complimentary and no based on any hierarchy of importance. This is shown, for instance, in the Evolutionary Tree diagram by Charles Jencks.

Furthermore, we should not focus only on architectural aspects, as Vitrubio expressed: "The architect should be equipped with knowledge of many branches of study and varied kinds of learning... This knowledge is the child of practice and theory." It is fascinating how Research Methods lectures made us understand how our knowledge might not only be driven to the architectural field, but expanded the references and awareness to a wider range of interdisciplinary approaches. The opening phrases of Vitruvius' first book of architecture strengthen the fundamentally multidisciplinary understanding required by the architect (arkhi-tekton – from greek: master– builder). Is not only necessary in basic architectural education as Vitruvius argues, but is imperative in architectural research education too.

The thesis that I am developing has as location the Midtown area in New York City. Complex Projects establishes a strict given structure (studio, lectures and seminar in parallel) closely linked to rigid methods, which then provides freedom of the design choices. This means that the area of research and also the organization of the course are given but students have freedom to choose fascination and topics to develop. In my case, and due to my concern about social issues and changes occurred in the area, the research is based on the understanding of the historical background of Hell's Kitchen and Clinton Piers (area under study) and the current situation and willingness of the community living in the area, there is a clear need for a stable community. Threatened by the gentrification trends and the increase of living costs due to real state pressures, the questions that arise are how to create living spaces for the community so as to recover a belonging feeling that seems to be diminished. How can the understanding of living practices and placemaking (based on creative engine, in this case) help to create a design that allows for the regeneration of an area and revitalize the neighborhood?

II   RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

2.1. Selected research methods

Within this course and through the development of my own thesis, I realized that the approach followed in the research was mainly context led. Allowing the context to take the lead in the research process is one way of establishing the primary importance of the physical, social or historical setting,[3] while also recurring to more methods and theories. Trying to show the complexity of the context of the

research due to the scope of the studio, from urban scale to the architectural object, the tools used have been multiple.

As a group, we started with the development of quantitative research based on the analysis of objective elements (called Hard Data phase). We worked on a layered analysis based on data statistics and objective information involving demographics, identities, history, culture, public spaces, environment and infrastructure. We tried to understand the evolutionary tendencies and processes in the area, and show them with graphic production of plenty collection of maps, charts, evolution timelines… Mapping as main tool but we also another kind of drawings like sections and axonometries, due to the relevance of height and typological elements of buildings in such a context, New York. Collages were also included so as to reflect users, ways of use of spaces, activities and some more subjective assumptions that helped to understand the multiple identities that the area englobes. From this first phase, and following the methodology set out by Kevin Lynch (The image of the City, driven by phenomenology), it was possible to determine three distinctive areas within the site of research with their own image and meaning: Clinton Piers, Hell's Kitchen and Midtown Manhattan. These three areas are completely different in character, function and size and has driven our organizational structure for the followings steps in the research. However, there is a common thread that seem to bind them: the inhabitants.
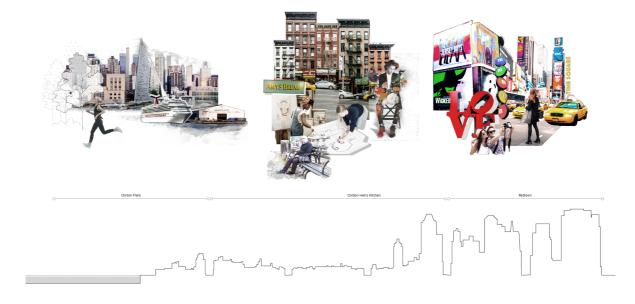

Figure 1. Collage showing the three identities of the area in relation to typologies.

A second phase, called Soft Data, was developed individually in order to work on our individual fascinations and bring a topic of relevance to be developed during the rest of the thesis. In this phase, a qualitative research (e.g. critical discourse analysis) was deeply developed through the analysis of theories in relation to social practices (placemaking, appropriation of spaces) and spatial conditions; all of this in order to get a more detailed understanding of how the neighborhood functions and how people live and inhabit public spaces. During the fieldwork, it was possible to use the tools of observation and place interpretation to describe existing socio-spatial qualities, all of this shown in recordings and a video done in group, emphasizing the three identities of the area. Interviews to inhabitants helped us for the collection of data and brought us relevant perspectives about main issues. It was being on site and in the field, that one can truly understand the atmosphere of the space, the social interactions that are actually taking place, the appropriation of places; essentially the crux of the cities working (Tuan, 1990).

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2.2. Epistemic frameworks

I made use of a combination of different methodological approaches highlighting the qualitative research, which involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials, while paying attention to the "natural settings" (the objects of inquiry are not removed from the venues in which they typically exist as part of everyday life). Within this type of research, critical discourse analysis and the phenomenological approach are the epistemic frameworks that have helped me more. A more integrative research is advocated because each typical approach benefits and complements the others.[4]

2.3. Relevance and challenges

The major strengths of qualitative research flow from its capacity to take in the rich and holistic qualities of real-life circumstances or settings. In fact, each strategy brings strengths and weaknesses that is complementary in combination with other approaches.[5] It is based on human experience and observation, resulting in a research that encourages creativity in decoding and expressing the data collected. It also allows to be far more speculative,[6] while basing on context and relevant theories.

III   RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

3.1. Critical discourse analysis: historical and theoretical context

Discourse analysis Critical discourse analysis (which emerged from 'critical linguistics' developed at the University of East Anglia during the 1970s) offers a unique approach to the qualitative analysis of social texts; it consists of a method of critique – often found within cultural studies - that is appropriate to architecture and urbanism.[7] This approach acknowledges that our world is shaped by social interactions and by the range of texts available to us (magazines, movies, advertisements, political speeches, drawings…). As Burr (2015) noted, "A discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, images, stories and so on that, in some way together, produce a particular version of events."[8] It refers to a particular picture that is painted of the area under study in a particular way of representing with a certain light. The operating assumption of this methodology is that every form of cultural production includes a series of reflections of the broader context within which it is produced. This means that the most apparently innocent forms of cultural production can actually tell you a great deal about the social context of their production.[9] By using discourse analysis, researchers can enhance the scope of inquiry by exploring how discourses inform about social context. This allows researchers to explore research questions that are socially, temporally and culturally grounded, and helps scholars to uncover the assumptions they bring to their projects. In addition, a theoretical framework may be used as an analytic lens to examine the discourses at play in the social scenes being investigated.[10]

3.2. Phenomenology: historical and theoretical context

Phenomenological inquiry is considered the most recognized of the qualitative approaches adopted in architectural research.[11] This enables architects to look deeper into elements and feel the essence of the phenomena, revealing them through images.[12] It is a method of inquiry that brings together people and their world – the object and the subject in their unity. In other words, the human-made world and the environment are analyzed together in a mutual connection that defines their close relationship.[13] Architectural theoreticians and architect started to investigate architectural phenomenology within the beginning of the 1950s. It was in the late 1970s and 1980s when it got

more relevance. It was established with the work of architectural theorist such as Gaston Bachelard's "The poetics of space" published in 1958 and Christian Norberg-Schulz's "Genius loci. Towards a phenomenology of Architecture" published in 1979. In particular, as mentioned above, the work of Kevin Lynch, "The Image of the City", published in 1960, proved most insightful in guiding my research. Phenomenology in relation to the diagnosis of the multiple identities that coexist within the area of research and the mapping of elements of the city (Landmarks -POI-, paths, districts, edges and nodes) were the most relevant aspects extracted from the theory of Lynch. According to Kevin Lynch, the identity of any given place is constructed by the combination of its physical image and the meaning, whether practical or emotional, that must be given by observer. Physical image and meaning are two entities that together form the identity of a place and these are not truly separable.

3.3. Critical positioning in regards to the selected approach

Thanks to the recommended literature offered by the studio's seminar, we have explored deeper concepts and cultural elements that influence New York City and, therefore, our area under study. Not only architectural books, but also books that bring specific details about culture and context like, for instance, The Condition of Postmodernity and A Brief History of Neoliberalism by David Harvey, have helped us to build theoretical frameworks and understand cultural assumptions. Critical discourse analysis in architecture might also consider questions of vernacular architecture. A version of this approach was developed by Ronald William Brunskill to use the architectures built within such continuous tradition and context as demonstrating the social relations and assumptions made by people on how to live.[14] In the case of the own research, Forms Follows Finance, by Carol Willis, helped me to understand the specificity of typologies that exists in New York and why it was developed in this way, introducing the relevance of finance and political aspect in architecture.

In relation to phenomenology, the book "Death and Life of Great American Cities" by Jane Jacobs, helped us to understand ways of approaching a case under study, from a more experiential and phenomenological perspective. "The richness and depth of her (J. Jacobs) many examples of the socio-physical dynamics of life in New York were powerfully persuasive… to explore the multiple socio-physical dynamics that contribute to the vitality of urban life".[15] Or using the words of Groat and Wang, this approach allowed me to deeply understand "how people in real-world situations make sense of their environment and themselves"[16]. The field trip was extremely decisive and this phenomenological approach helped me to address the different layers and meanings of site, the "sense of that place". It is a theory that incorporates the architectural form together with the invisible aspects that are part of society: meanings that lie beyond the real and the tactile.

IV   POSITIONING

As expressed above in the introduction, waves of gentrification have provoked the reduction of options of a community that has been fighting against it over the last 50 years. Having this term as main issue in the area, the concern is how to, allowing for affordability in the area, create a stable community in the area. Furthermore, globalization is also having a huge impact in this neighbourhood generating the detriment to local activities, all of it influenced by the real state pressures. Understanding this context, some of the lectures and readings of these lecture series brought relevant examples that helped me to find my position about this type of social issues that is currently controversial and an on-going case all over the world and even more crucial in the city of New York.

4.1. Investigating social and spatial narratives

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In this line, I found extremely inspiring the lecture by Marieke Berkers, where she exposed some really interesting projects to investigate about social and spatial practices. Not related in terms of scale but in terms of awareness and attention paid, the London Bethnal Green research developed by Alisson and Peter Smithson (CIAM 1953), undertook the investigation of non-familiar environments so as to discover users' perspectives and the diagnosis of non-used public spaces and lack of qualities for liveability and activities done by the neighbours. Through this, we can extrapolate the way of knowing to the understanding of identities, perspectives and belonging feelings of communities and people found in any area under research. Place-identity as a cognitive sub-structure of self-identity consists of an endless variety of cognitions related to the past, present, and anticipated physical settings that define and circumscribe the day-to-day existence of the person. These cognitions are evolved through the person's selective engagement with his or her environment on both a conscious and unconscious level. What we are saying in effect is that place identity reflects in its clustering of cognitive components the individual's experiences in each of these environments and in the relationships of these environments to each other in defining the day-to-day activities of a person.[17]

4.2. The architect as activist and facilitator

This awareness is also expressed in some crucial texts uploaded, for example, "The architect and the public: empowering people in post-war architecture culture", where Tom Avermaete maps how these different roles can inspire contemporary architectural discourse and practice in the development of newfound and more nuanced architectural attitudes towards the public.
The public has always been one of the most vital concerns for modern architecture. While in previous epochs buildings were often the sheer representation of imperial, religious, or economic power, in the modern era there seems to be an increased awareness about their social and societal dimension: architecture has become a matter of the public.[18] The following quotation extracted from the text by T. Avarmaete express the idea:

"A miracle of precise associations appears before our eyes, a result of mathematically exact precision. My friends, our efforts can produce such miracles! For whom is the miracle? For the general public."[19]
—Le Corbusier, 1947

A first articulation this new approach to the public can be found in the two so-called grid presentations that caused upheaval during the ninth Congres International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) in Aix en Provence in 1953. Later, in the end of the 1960s, Aldo van Eyck also defined the concept of the architect as activist, in resonance with the socially engaged spirit of this period, architects and urban planners started to apply their professional skills and abilities in working for social and spatial justice, expressing the definition of the public as community that is under threat. In many cases the activist architect used his professional skills to represent a disempowered community and resist oppressive forces.[20] The concept of the architect as facilitator, defined by Giancarlo de Carlo in the 1969 essay "Architecture's Public", brought some specific connotations in the relation of users and architects. He referred here that "Architects and inhabitants should work side by side on issues of information, education, analysis, survey, planning, work, and construction… all barriers between builders and users must be abolished".[21] This affirmation is extremely relevant because it is often missing and there are practical examples that show that neighborhoods designed in collaboration with local groups worked better.

In relation to the last statement, it is highlighted the importance that knowledge about the specific contexts have in order to understand actual needs and tendencies that have evolved in current situations, this can be done through the critical discourse analysis, since the cultural and

political settings are of huge relevance. Moreover, working with phenomenology architects are challenged to approach the collective with a more subjective and intimate form of investigation, to completely understand hidden meanings, connotations and, consequently, ways of living to be incorporated in each design.

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