

LSRM FINAL ASSIGNMENT

Political space: A theoretical and a practical research approach

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I AN INVESTIGATION OF POLITICAL SPACE

Research has always been connected with the architectural design and forms a vital role in discussion and development of every project. It can create the base for solid arguments of the design proposal and defense the design decisions. There are different methods to conduct a research. They define the aspects of approaching a topic. However, it doesn't mean that if you choose to make a research based on all the methodologies you will have more accurate results. As researchers and designers, we have to choose which methodological approaches are more suitable for our research depending on the topic and our personal interests.

Ray Lucas argues that *"in order for architecture to progress, we must continue to conduct research into its history as context and precedent, the social and cultural role of buildings and the theory of what it means to build and dwell."* (Lucas 2016), Through the lectures of the course we became familiar with different kind of methodologies and methods and their effect on the results of the research and architectural design. For example, at the lecture of Havik about phenomenology and architectural perception, I realized that the way we experience architecture might be in a way subjective but there are tools and methods that can make it a legitimate approach of architectural research. Also, at Berkers' lecture about praxeology and Bruno Taut's research about the design of a kitchen based on the female perspective made me understand that in architecture is important to conduct research not only based on the typology, but also based on the perspective of the user.

Having these on my mind, I started thinking about the research for my thesis. This year the context of the design is the metropolitan city of Brussels as a capital of Belgium and Europe. The special characteristic of that city is that the diversity of the population, since everyone is part of a minority. Also, the formal administrative powers and the informal powers as activist groups form complementary relationships. So, the role of people and how they perceive spatial characteristics and dynamic relations was important to me. The topic of the design studio is the design investigation of administrative center (city hall), that can work not only as an office building, but also as a place where people can freely express their ideas and concerns. To realize that a question that framed the studio's research was: "What is a political space?" So, the connection of the research with other epistemes like social and political science, for me was inevitable.

My research about the political space had as starting point the universities as primer political spaces, because according to Eric B. Gorham, they are not only places of education but also places of political engagement and promotion of community interests. (Gorham,2000) Universities are also institutes, where specific hierarchies are developed. These power relationships that we meet also in other administrative structures are questioned and challenged by protest and activism, having consequences to their spatial arrangements. In Brussels urban activism reclaimed the public space and challenged the hierarchies in the urban set up. So, how the design of a political space can revise the spatial relationships in order to redefine the existed hierarchies creating a democratic space that can include everyone?

II APPROACHES OF RESEARCH

The research about the political space was a context driven investigation that theory and methodology would be combined to give answers. The primary focus of the research was the political space, its definition and its spatial characteristics. My research was separated into two parts, the theoretical and the practical. The first one covered a cross disciplinary research about the definition of political space on the field of political science and a case study research about four universities. The practical part covered a research through model making, focusing on the spatial and hierarchical relationships of such place.

To carry through with this investigation, I decided to follow a qualitative research. According to Trochim, this methodology leads to a research that the data are not recorded in numerical form and is typically the approach for mixed used methods. (Trochim, 2005) Also Wang argues that qualitative research assumes a subjective reality and a view of the researcher as interactive with the subject of inquiry. (Wang, 2013) The possibility of the high level of subjectivity and that the evidence would be non-numerical led me to choose this approach.

To be more specific, both the research about the definition of the notion of political space and the case study was text-based. The main texts that served as sources, was "The Human Condition" of H.Arendt, that investigates three types of activities of everyday life and where they can take place. Focusing, on the notion of political action, she argues that "the polis is the organization of people as it arises out of acting and speaking together and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose no matter where they happen to be." (Arendt, 1998) The other text was R.Sennet's "The spaces of Democracy", where he argues that the theaters can serve as spaces about political action. (Sennet, 1998)

However, on the literature there was no specific definition about the political space and its hierarchical and spatial relationships that can be perceived as democratic. So, I decided to continue with a case study about universities because as I have already mentioned, this specific type of building can be perceived as political spaces. I wanted to have a limited amount of cases that I can easily study and compare with each other. For that reason, I chose only four cases based on their different spatial arrangement and networks, so I could search the different hierarchical relations that can be formed. My study cases were: The All Souls University, the Berlin Free University, the Rolex learning center and the ecole d'architecture in Nantes. The focus was on how people use their spaces and how they perceive the diverse relationships, by studying the existed literature and architect's intentions and perspectives. A similar research approach was followed by A.Adhya's research that explored the nature of the public realm in everyday urban experience in college towns. (Wang, 2013)

Beside the literature-based research, I wanted to use a more practical approach for the research about the spatial relationships of the political space. My studio encourages the research by design, using model making as tool. So, I decided to follow this methodological approach to understand the impact of changing hierarchical relations on the spatial characteristics of a place. An architect that uses the model as a research tool is P. Zumthor. He claims that the physical object is more important than conceptual thoughts. Different types of models show different things, but all of them can be tools for checking and testing spatial relations. (Havik, 2013)

III FACTS AND THOUGHTS

John W. Creswell describes the qualitative research as "*an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures and various blends of materials.*" (Creswell, 2007) I liked this metaphor because it explains the complexity and the various worldview and perspectives that this kind of research contains. Its definition has been involved through time, but the openness and flexibility of its design remained. In a qualitative study the people, how they perceive a problematic, their thoughts and their behavior play an important role. According to Creswell such an approach is a way to conduct a case study. In my research the human perspective and people's interference with the space is a primary aspect.

The case study is a common methodology in various scientific fields that have strong link with humans, like psychology and sociology, even business. Case studies contribute to our knowledge of individual, organizational, social and political phenomena and the distinctive need for that kind of studies arises out of the desire to understand such complex phenomena. (Yin, 2003) So, R.Yin defines the case study as "*an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context*" (Wang,2013) and he categorize them according to the type to the research question into exploratory, descriptive and explanatory studies. An "how" and "why" question leads to a research with explanatory character. (Yin,2003) Gerring on the other hand categorize them depending on their spatial and temporal variations. For him "*case study is an intensive study for the purpose of understanding a larger class of similar units.*" (Gerring,2007) So, in my research I have four case studies about universities' buildings, trying to understand the characteristics and the hierarchical relations of a political space.

However, in architecture, research and design were interconnected notions. Schurk claims that "from the intersection between the fields of science and architecture it follows that every architectural project also entails scientific element. So, the design can be considered as research." (EAAE, 2015) The distinction between architecture as a product/ result and research process is not very clear. There are different points of views regarding the character of research by design. Frayling defines research through/by art and design as "*research on material properties, development of technology in relation to*

a material production, or studio projects which are documented, contextualized and communicated.” (EAAE,2015) For him if the artifacts are produced in order to support processes of thinking, then this approach is research by design. Another, not very different approach is the definition of EAAE, that “any kind of inquiry in which design is substantial constituent of the research process is referred to as research by design. In such research, design process forms the pathway through new insights, knowledge, practices or products coming into being.” (EAAE,2015)

The design process can use various tools to gain knowledge and reach on conclusions. One of these tools is the physical model making. The world model comes from the Latin word “modellus” that means small measure and is a representation of a mental image, or an example for something that is to be made. (Gänshirt, 2007) It dates back to 5th century BC but only since the 14th century became relevant to the practice of the building, when F. Brunelleschi used them to test building methods. During the Renaissance model become the primary method for communication of design ideas in architecture. The 19th century model served as a tool for teaching. A great resurgence of the use of model as design tool became the next century, when Gropius used physical models to explore and test ideal quickly, as Rietveld and Talin used them to give architectural form to ideas about space. As the 20th century progressed, physical models sometimes became fundamental means and resonating echoes of radical ideas and projects. (Dunn, 2014) Gänshirt also argues that “*perceiving with fingers and thinking with scalpel make it possible to get to know the qualities of materials, to explore their formal language, but also to understand structural set ups.*” (Gänshirt, 2007)

So, through history we can see that models were used for various purposes: communication, technical evaluation and testing, and exploration. For research purposes an explorative model is suitable for discovering another reality by speculation. Its key characteristic is that it is concerned with testing out new ideas. Peter Eisenman created a catalogue of such models that reflected his research on geometry and document his different design approaches for the design of House X. (Dunn, 2014) Model making can be a useful tool for my research of spatial characteristics that can create new hierarchical relationships.

IV POSITION

Architecture is a field that combines science with art. However, a lot of people outside this practice tend towards the aspect of art and claim that architectural decisions are arbitrary. This is why, it is important to communicate that architectural design is interwoven with research and sometimes the boundaries between them are not clear. The architectural research provides solid arguments about design decisions and explanations that help their validation. It can also connect the design with the past or with other scientific fields. Although, we have to consider that architecture has to do with people and day life, so it is common that architectural research most of times includes investigations that gather non numerical data. At the lecture about phenomenology we become familiar with the theoretical framework and the argument that human experience can be a scientific approach. In general, there is no strict definition about what is considered as pure scientific research and a lot of people argue that such approaches aren't considered as scientific research because of the high level of subjectiveness. However, there are methodologies that are implemented to other humanitarian scientific fields, except architecture and can validate the results of such inquiries.

Such methodology is the case study research by qualitative approach. By conducting a case study research, I had the chance to be familiar and understand the theoretical framework of the phenomenon that I focused on and at the same time analyze different aspects of the subject of research and collect data from various sources. In addition, just as in all scientific fields, so too in architecture the aim of the research is to contribute to the knowledge and offer new perspectives. Case study offer a link between history/past and present and theory and practice in the context of architectural design. So, learning from the past and analyze a contemporary phenomenon to an existing context is a way to validate and revise the context offering new perspectives. For example, my research about universities as political spaces, helped me understand the power relationships that their spatial characteristics reflect, as well as how the users perceive these hierarchies. This worked as a background knowledge for further with more practical way and as the way to continue the research about relationships, networks

and agencies not in a specific type of building but in a city (Brussels) where the design project take place.

As I have already argued in architecture design and research comes together. The chair of interiors building cities, adopt the approach of research by making, as a way of learning and testing personal positions. A study of models and design processes reveal an explorative nature, which being founded upon an understanding of spatial possibilities, transcends a singular reliance upon drawing. (Dunn, 2007) The physical model can be tool of architectural research. Renzo Piano explains his own working procedure thus: "You start by sketching then you do a drawing, then you make a model and then you go to reality and then back to drawing. You build up a circularity between drawing and making and then back again." (Sennett, 2008) The model can be a testing tool, when it comes to define spatial relations. For me worked as such to test different ways of creating hierarchical relationships that can represent a political space and define characteristics of a space that can provide a degree of freedom and serve as a democratic space.

In conclusion, before this course I didn't have realize the interaction of architecture and research because in the academic field, research is conducted through a course that follows specific methodologies and method. It is important to be aware of the ways that you conduct the research because they may lead you to different paths and design decisions. For example, my initial findings about political space define it as an extroverted, open space interpreted with public space and it can include everyone. It is a loose space that can host spontaneous activities and give the opportunity, for communication and collective action between users, as well as synergy-creating spaces that promote the sense of community. However, if I had followed another research approach, I might have a different proposal for what is political space. This explains why in architecture there isn't only one answer or solution to a "problem" but different approaches that can be validated based on their arguments.

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APPENDIX

