

ONBEPERKT WONEN

A critical position in approaching a specific target group

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Thesis "A social residential environment for young people with a mild intellectual disability"

I BACK TO SCHOOL

Thinking about the methodological approach of architecture, I need to start at my own perspective first. The reason I am taking part in this course all started at elementary school. There was a little boy in the middle of the class, called Martijn, always drawing facades of dwellings. Mostly freestanding villas where he dreamed of. After school he went home to continue drawing on the facades and complete them with the floorplans. During the weekend he built models of his drawings to finish his ideas. This was the starting point of the willingness to become an architect.

That view never changed, neither during high school. Although I had to overcome a few difficult periods, here I am now. Not surprising I am in the chair of Architecture and Dwelling now, participating in the studio 'Dutch Housing'. Although I see myself working in the exclusive villa market, this is not a realistic assignment to graduate at university. The focus in the graduation studio is on a new working and living environment in the Merwe Vierhaven, hereafter called 'M4H' in the West Harbors of Rotterdam.

This course opened my eyes in positioning myself in the architectural field. I've always struggled with my position during university, cause I am not feeling always related to the way in which university looks at the architectural profession. My approach in the architectural field has always been creating what people really need. More practice based than related to the art of design. Especially exclusive villa architecture evokes contradiction at university, cause it seems this assignment does not have a social dimension and it is all about the money. But for me this field gives the architect the possibility to communicate with and design for the people who are going to live there; the actual dwellers.

The lecture about practices, given by Marieke Berkers, showed me that this is actually the closest relationship an architect can have with his client. And that is exactly what intrigues me the most. In her lecture Berkers refers to Jane Jacobs, who advocates the bottom-up approach.¹ Thinking about my graduation project, this approach will be implemented in the process.

The greatest challenges in the Dutch Housing Graduation Studio are a high-density and inclusive city. Inclusive means to me 'for everyone'. Another challenge we are currently facing in the Netherlands is the one of '1 Million Homes' by 2030. But such a huge assignment raises the question if those dwellings will be inclusive enough for all different users. In my thesis I am stating the problem that the standard dwelling is not suitable for everyone. Therefore I focus on a specific group of people; young people with a mild intellectual disability.

In the Netherlands there are around 1,1 million people with a mild intellectual disability.² This means they have an IQ between 50 and 85 and are not self-reliant in one or more social aspects.³ Since the entrance of the 'Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning' (Wmo) in 2015 these people can no longer apply for their housing via the care for disabled people. They have to follow the regular route just like others. But because of their cognitive and also financial disabilities they have often little or none perspective on a own dwelling.⁴ Furthermore, they need a living environment which stimulates them on developing their social skills. This leads to my research question: "*How can the design of the residential environment contribute to the social self-reliance of young people with a mild intellectual disability?*".

¹ Sennett, R. (2018). *Building and Dwelling – Ethics for the City*. London, United Kingdom: London: Penguin Books Ltd.

² Wottiez, I., Eggink, E., Ras, M. (2019) *Het aantal mensen met een licht verstandelijke beperking: een schatting*. The Hague, Netherlands: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

³ Architectuur Lokaal (2016). *Wonen in een kelderbox? (Betere) Woonmogelijkheden voor jongeren met een licht verstandelijke beperking*. pp. 4.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 4.

II JUST A LITTLE DIFFERENT

During the research process it is essential to understand the way of working as part of validating your end result.⁵ Without this it is not possible to critically reflect on the research process. Therefore the researcher has to be aware of his point of view. Lucas relates to the well-known objective and subjective approach and compares that to the definition of Kenneth Pike's definition of the emic and the etic account. My interest in dwelling arises from the desire to know how the future residents eventually will use the building. Therefore it is essential to know their way of living, which is a very emic approach. Answering the research question asks for the same approach.

The research is based on studying the needs of a specific group of people: young people with a mild intellectual disability. Without understanding the situation they live now, it will not be possible to design a new residential environment for them. The part of the research question which says "*contribute to the social self-reliance*" asks for a deeper understanding of their disability. This research lies in the field of the architectural social sciences, where social sciences helps us to understand how people actually live.⁶

This very subjective kind of approaching is an aspect of qualitative research.⁷ The complexity in this field comes with the personal engagement of the architect. "*Fuller immersion in a culture avoids detachment from the facts on the ground, and a more immediate engagement with people and their lives.*"⁸ It's the profession of the architect to be involved in a emic way, but still be able to create solutions and make decisions on an ethic level.

One of the methodologies which is used during the research process is creating a more in-depth overview of the specific target group by observing. According to Linda Groat this is one of the most characterizing methods of data collection in the ethnographic methodology.⁹ But because of the limited time in the research process of the graduation studio it is not possible to spend time with people of the target group, where the outcome is enhanced by the length of time.¹⁰ Therefore is chosen to approach the same outcome in a different way.

An general representation of the target group is formed by a Dutch documentary series about six young people with a mild intellectual disability. The series 'Net ff anders' consists of six episodes which shows in every episode the life and the difficulties of one person.¹¹ Criticism can be given on the fact that this way of participant¹² observation only shows what the cameras have recorded, although it gives a good overview of six persons with comparable problems in social self-reliance.

The general representation is furthermore enhanced by using literature about young people with a mild intellectual disability. The ultimate goal is to find out who these people are, what their problems are, how they live, what they need and eventually how the design of their residential environment can contribute to their social self-reliance. Therefore I am interviewing the professionals who take care of these people, to gain in-sight information on a more objective level.

This research plan is converging from a emic approach to a more ethic overview. This refers to the lecture about Praxeology, where Marieke Berkers talks about the Commonalities of Atelier Bow Wow. By thinking about a group of individual instead of individuals only, the architect is able to create architecture that is related to those people. There is no gap between the architecture and the community of the building.¹³

⁵ Lucas, R. (2016). *Research Methods for Architecture*. London, England: Laurence Kind Publishing Ltd. pp. 10.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 15

⁷ Ibid, pp. 36.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 10.

⁹ Groat, L., Wang, D. (2013). *Architectural Research Methods*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. pp. 225.

¹⁰ Lucas, R. (2016). *Research Methods for Architecture*. London, England: Laurence Kind Publishing Ltd. pp. 38.

¹¹ KRO-NCRV (2020). *KRO-NCRV presenteert: Net ff anders*. Retrieved from: <https://www.kro-ncrv.nl/nieuws/kro-ncrv-presenteert-net-ff-anders>

¹² Groat, L., Wang, D. (2013). *Architectural Research Methods*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. pp. 225.

¹³ Berkers, M. (2020). *Lecture Praxeology*. Retrieved from: <https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2l/le/content/192744/viewContent/1622413/View>

III POWER TO THE PEOPLE

The ethnographic approach in architecture emerged from its anthropological and social roots in the early 20th century.¹⁴ One of the most popular methods to collect data in the ethnographic fieldwork is that of observation. Observing was a way to find out how people actually lived in their dwelling. This study of human actions was the core of praxeology.

Bruno Taut was one of the people who was influential for the praxeological way of thinking.¹⁵ In his book 'Die Neue Wohnung' he analyzed the conventional dwellings at that time and tried to re-design the plans in a more efficient way. In the beginning of the 1920's he observed how the women used that typical houses in that time. Mapping the routes of how the women moved in house was his method to conclude the floorplans were not efficient enough.¹⁶ Eventually he came up with smaller floorplans which were more efficient but also cost-reductive.

After WWII, the building of new dwellings accelerated because of the huge industrialization and the reconstruction of the cities. Mass-housing caused a gap between the building and the users. "*Such developments attempted to tell people how to live rather than ask them how they would like to.*"¹⁷ From there, a dialogue between the users of the building and the architect was missing. The urge to define a new relation was bigger than ever before. This eventually resulted in a rich field of new architectural positions and approaches.¹⁸

A group of architects and urbanists who presented their work in an innovative way was GAMMA, standing for 'Groupe d'Architects Modernes Marocains'.¹⁹ In 1952 they studied non-familiar environments in Algeria and Morocco. They observed how the people of those shantytowns lived. Because of the lack of documentation, they photographed and mapped all their findings. Interesting was how they used drawings to show that all the rooms in the houses transformed in bedrooms during night.²⁰ They presented their work, entitled with 'Habitat for the Greatest Number Grid at CIAM 9, in 1953. The presentation consisted of several panels with all the documented maps and photographs. They used the grid as a tool of thinking about the life and architecture in those neighbors.²¹

Also at CIAM, Peter and Alison Anderson presented a series of photographs to show the life on the streets in London.²² They hired a professional photographer to capture these moments. Photography as a tool to observe is extremely valuable²³, but where I am a professional photographer too, I think it depends on the gear you use when a photograph becomes observational material. People start to act different when they see a photographer, for spontaneous shots a longer lens is necessary because they would not notice you. This critic also applies to interviewing as a tool. People will say what they prefer to do instead of what they actually do. That's exactly the aim of the ethnographic approach; cutting through the differences between what people say and what they actually do.²⁴

All researchers mentioned above represent the thoughts of Jane Jacobs. Her bottom-up approach reflects her curiosity in people's doings.²⁵ During the years, tools of observations evolved. From mapping and drawing, to photography and eventually film. Someone who used this set of tools in his observation and in line with the approach of Jacobs was William H. White.

In his book 'The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces' he is investigating why some public spaces in cities work and others do not. "*In doing so, Holly Whyte laid the groundwork for a major movement to change the way public spaces are built and planned.*"²⁶ Just as Jacobs advocates to

¹⁴ Groat, L., Wang, D. (2013). *Architectural Research Methods*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. pp. 224.

¹⁵ Berkers, M. (2020). *Lecture Praxeology*. Retrieved from: <https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2/le/content/192744/viewContent/1622413/View>

¹⁶ Taut, B. (1924). *Die Neue Wohnung*. Berlin, Germany.

¹⁷ Lucas, R. (2016). *Research Methods for Architecture*. London, England: Laurence King Publishing Ltd. pp. 15.

¹⁸ Avermate, T. (2010). 'The Architect and the Public: Empowering the people in Postwar Architecture Culture', in Hunch. The Berlage Report on Architecture, Urbanism and Landscape, no. 14, 2010, pp. 49.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 49.

²⁰ Berkers, M. (2020). *Lecture Praxeology*. Retrieved from: <https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2/le/content/192744/viewContent/1622413/View>

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Lucas, R. (2016). *Research Methods for Architecture*. London, England: Laurence King Publishing Ltd. pp. 75.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 165.

²⁵ Sennett, R. (2018). *Building and Dwelling – Ethics for the City*. London, United Kingdom: London: Penguin Books Ltd.

²⁶ Whyte, W.H. (1980). *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. New York: Project for Public Spaces. pp. 3.

spend time in the cities and learn from reality, Whyte approaches his research in the same way. He spent much of his time over ten years, namely in New York. Observation was his method to find out what works. *“He has been looking at city space, talking with people, making notes, taking photographs and films...”*²⁷ When he started his study in 1970, observation had not been used in a major extent in the U.S, so it was innovative at that time. For instance, he mounted time-lapse cameras to record daily life. This way of researching led to recognizable rhythms and patterns of people in the streets.

IV POSITIONING

Dwelling architecture have for me always been an individual way of approaching. During my own research in the graduation studio I always had the actual dwellers in mind. Especially a specific target group asks for a specific approach. Young people with a mild intellectual disability are in need of a residential environment which stimulates their social self-reliance, stating the problem that the standard dwelling is not suitable for everyone.

Like Bruno Taut optimized the standard dwelling for women by observing their daily routes in the dwelling, I feel related to this interest in the human behavior. The study of human action and conduct, represented in the lecture of Berkers about Praxeology, was an eye opener for my own research. This talk gave me some concrete tools to study the actual users of the building, and not the imagined ones.²⁸ These tools were all adopted in the readings of Whyte.

Another interesting talk was that of Eireen Schreurs about the material culture. These days, identity is more important than ever. The outcome of the ethnographic approach have to be translated in a architectural way. The use of specific materialization can reflect the personalities of the people living in the building, and social and human relations as well.²⁹ But the materialization of a building can also have a positive effect on the mood in the building.

During the design process in the graduation studio I am constantly aware of these realizations. I am aiming for a building which stimulates the social self-reliance of young people with a mild intellectual disability. Going in dialogue with or observe the actual dwellers gives me the possibility to design a new residential environment which is suitable for them. In the eventually design it is important to me the actual dwellers can identify with their building, where materialization can fulfill this part.

During the research process of the graduation studio, the general approach is mostly on analyzing case studies. Although this seems to be a very significance way of studying³⁰, the results are still based on the imagined dwellers. We have to fill in how we think people live there on the base of information we found; floorplans, sections and pictures. For instance, one of our assignments was to draw routes of people approaching their dwelling. But we did this by using our own imagination of approaching the building.

Thinking about a deeper understanding, I think we need to go in dialogue with the people who actually live there. Observation tools like interviewing can help how people experience the building. Furthermore, it should be good to actually go there, observe and map how people approach their dwelling. This methodological is maybe not only missing in the graduation studio, but during the whole bachelor and master as well.

For a ethnographic approach it seems to me logical to have a close relationship with your client. Knowing your client, how he lives and how he uses a building is essential to come up with a new design. Using observation as a method will tell you more about your client or target group for who you are designing. This is also the approach in my graduation project. For my research it is essential to gain information about the problems and behavior of young people with a mild intellectual disability. Designing a building which contributes in a positive way to the social self-reliance of people is the core of my project. After graduation I will continue in this process where I see myself working in an architectural firm focussing on what the actual dwellers want to have built.

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 6.

²⁸ Berkers, M. (2020). *Lecture Praxeology*. Retrieved from: <https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2l/le/content/192744/viewContent/1622413/View>

²⁹ Schreurs, E. (2020). *Lecture Material Culture*. Retrieved from: <https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2l/le/content/192744/Home>

³⁰ Lucas, R. (2016). *Research Methods for Architecture*. London, England: Laurence Kind Publishing Ltd.

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