A Reflective Inquiry into the Position of Literary Research Methodology in Architectural Design

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The significance of a research methodological self-reflection in relation to design professions should not be underestimated. Research is an endeavor never free from our own values, but rather a system of inquiry based on personal truths about the workings of the world. These truths are thoroughly personal and context specific and are more accurately termed "assumptions". Thus, especially within the architectural profession which is concerned with shaping the physical world for social and political well-being, an understanding of the assumptions that play a role into forming the architectural culture is paramount.[1] Research always starts by the formulation of questions. The nature and formulation of these questions inherently guide the subsequent answers to them. An awareness of the assumptions influencing the forms and formulation of a specific inquiry will help take control over the outcomes of research. From this it follows that our ways of coming to our answers, the research methodologies, are equally important and carry and inherent bias. This bias becomes especially important once you consider architecture research process as elements of "designerly ways of doing"[2]. This refers to the alternation in the design process between thinking and acting. As a reflective practice the choice of methodology, thus, determines in a large part how knowledge is created and, therefore, how the built environment is materialized.[3]

This paper investigates how the graduation theme, The Intimate City, is approached through the use of a particular methodology. Subsequently, this essay will investigate into how this methodology has been used in the past, as to distil the possible the effect of such a method of inquiry. The graduation theme of this year alludes to the consideration of the city as a place where people come together and where "our private selves are brought into contact and collision with each other in public"[4]. The design project focusses on the making of a so-called 'city room' in which people can be together, not necessarily in the manner of a community -which always suggests the exclusivity of a group- but as different individuals, as subjects within a constantly shifting metropolitan condition. As such, the thesis aspires to address research questions such as: what is the effect of urban conditions on users, citizens and/or subjects? And what are their relations to these conditions and environments?

Considering the almost anthropological theme of the graduation project, it is important that the methodology employed facilitates the search for this human experience. As such, this thesis, under the chair of Interiors, Buildings, Cities engages in a phenomenological manner of research into the experience of the built environment. Phenomenology is known as a branch of philosophy and is concerned with how things appear to us and how they are given meaning.[5] Architectural phenomenology focusses on a human experience of architecture that is historically contingent. As a movement, it stands in opposition to the anti-historicism of postwar modernism.[6] The graduation project seeks to engage with any given situation with sensitivity to its political, social, cultural and material inheritance as to imagine a possible architectural intervention of value.

Under this phenomenological framework, the research design process engages with the perceptual experiences of the self and others by analyzing writings (and imagery). These writings are critically examined and seek to form a relevant narrative in relation to the design project. From this, typological reasoning and an investigation into material culture is used to concretize these findings into a congruent architectural language. This methodological process aims to clarify ambiguous design problems and embed them into a context specific, momentary understanding of a place. However, it must be noted that the aim is not to reproduce the specific architectural language, but rather to understand and thereafter cultivate it in order to allow a well-considered, but distinct architectural language to emerge. This search for situationally sensitive yet novel architecture is approached through experimentation in a simulated version of reality, mainly through the practice of model making.

Considering that the inquiry into the perceptual experiences of people through the use of literature and imagery is at the hart of the employed phenomenological framework, a review of the current research about this methodology can shine a light on the relevance of this method in design research. Throughout the whole design process, literature -in its various forms- can be utilized at any stage. As Havik states "literary language [is used] to highlight aspects of embodied perception, memory and everyday spatial practice"[7]. More concretely, this entails the use of literature to, for example, investigate and describe existing socio-spatial practices, such as the material culture of a specific region. Another possible use of literature, is the construction of narrative as a tool to render the relationship between spaces and movements within those spaces.[8] Furthermore, scenario's may be employed to describe and envision the possible events that occur within an environment as to ground the design in actual everyday life. An important aspect of the usage of literary knowledge is the way in which it can address the uncertainties which the architectural profession has to deal with, such as the notions of subject-object or reality-imagination.[9] It is inherently subjective and, thus, moves away from the search for a shared truth but rather investigates differences. As such, the utilization of literary methods asks the designer to engage with ambiguity mainly by seeking to formulate relevant questions rather than definite answers.

To be able to comprehend to what extent the use of literature can influence the architectural design process, an outline of the historical-theoretical development can prove useful. As Pallasmaa states: "writing, along with drawing, has naturally been the medium of architectural historiography and theory since Vitruvius, Alberti, Serlio and Palladio"[10]. Historically, the acts of building and storytelling were never considered separate, but rather complementary to one another. This can be seen in the decorations of historical buildings, which convey the popular narratives, morals, values and ideals of a society from ancient times to the Enlightenment.[11] However, the manner in which literature is used in architectural research such as it is described in this essay, was not explicitly apparent until the 20th century. The modern age introduced a more personal literary approach as exemplified in the writings of many architects from John Ruskin and William Morris to Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto and Luis Kahn.[12] Although the writings of these men are very different in the manner which they use language, they all have a tendency to be ideological. Loos, for example, is inclined to use the form of rhetoric in his writings, as to persuade his audience of his social and political views, which he has attempted to convey in his architecture.[13] Conversely, Kahn's writings tend to be poetic and mystical and readily use metaphors. His writings do not pursue any rational or theoretical argumentation, but rather seek to activate the readers imagination through the use of these metaphors.[14] The latter example can be seen as a precursor to the idea that -with the rise of phenomenology in the 20th century- literature can be used as a tool to generate knowledge as opposed to merely the communication of it.

The philosophy of phenomenology in architecture introduced an alternative way of thinking about design problems, opposing the popular mode of thinking of scientific reduction. Phenomenology is interested in how the world appears to us through our perceptive experience.[15] In architecture this is demonstrated through the manipulation of space, material, light and shadow. This philosophy can be seen as grounded in the Heidegger's idea of being "in the world"[16], with which he meant the human existence to be inseparable from the physical reality in which we find ourselves, which, in essence, is spatial. Contemporary phenomenological theorists such as, Peter Zumthor, Alberto Perez-Gomez and Steven Holl, all make a case for prioritizing the human experience in design. Often, they use their writing in symbioses with their architecture to make explicit the experience, memories, thoughts and feelings of being in a place. Foregoing what human action is intended with their design or what beliefs they want to bestow on the visitors of their architecture, they focus on the momentary human experience. For example, in his book, Thinking Architecture, Zumthor describes his most clear expressions of architecture through the voices of texture and material. He illustrates childhood memories of, for example, the gravel under his feet or the texture of a door handle. Zumthor uses words to make explicit that what remembers and experiences in his mind's eye. In essence, he is narrating his architectural experience. He goes on to say "memories like these are contain the deepest

architectural experience that I know. They are the reservoirs of the architectural atmospheres and images that I explore in my work as an architect".[17]

As noted before, the traditional tools of architectural research, often following the rational modes of thinking, are unable to engage with the ambiguities of architecture.[18] In regards to the graduation theme -in which the research is embedded- it deals with questions of intimacy, an innately human experience. As such, the use of literary tools within the phenomenological framework aligns well, as it aims to generate knowledge about this sensation and subsequently embed this into the material world. In this way, literature foregoes the traditional use by architects in the form of descriptive or rhetoric text, but is used as a tool in a dialectic manner: as the reader and the writer. This can prove useful throughout the architectural design process in many ways. Firstly, literary tools can aid in the search and creation of meaning of a project. In regards to the question of intimacy in the public arena, writings on the public versus the private self can elucidate the complexity of the problem which is faced. Subsequently, reflective writings spurs one to take a position regardless of the subjectivity at hand. Furthermore, this position can be conveyed through the use of literature in the broader sense. Literary art in the form of movie scripts, stories and poems can be used as metaphors to convey the human experience, but allows enough ambiguity to let the audience tap into their own understanding of intimacy.

As discussed, literary tools in design research can aid in gaining an understanding of a place beyond the rational tools such as diagrams, plans and maps. These tools, in their nature, focus on the subjectivity of experience and sensory perception and thus add a human dimension. This search for understanding and operating within the complexity of the world, rather than reducing and abstracting it into concise and manageable design problems, is an approach in design research that seems to fall in line with the general paradigm shift taking place. In *Neuroecology: Notes Toward a Synthesis*, Sanford Kwinter summarizes trends in architectural research. He argues that "In the worlds of design and art practice I would argue, attention has shifted decisively in recent decades from the signifying modes of communication of objects to illocutionary ones, in which the introduction of forms into the world can be said to result in a 'transformation of states. Given this shift of focus, a new emphasis on 'continuum thinking' is emerging, in which, among other signal developments, we find an increasing concern with environments (rather than with objects, be these cities, buildings, facades or chairs)"[19]. Continuum thinking operates under an eco-logic (rather than ego-logic) mindset. Eco-logic is a logic of intensities, whereby it is concerned with the evolution of a process or processes.[20] In other words, it does not look at the given as it is, but rather questions how the given is given. In regards to architecture in particular, it understands that nothing is logically necessary and that the landscape is there and beyond our control. From this, architecture can be understood as a mediating force, which, little by little, reconstructs our existence according to how we understand the world.[21]

As much as the environment is shaped by humans, the environment also shapes us. One of the topics in the current discourse in the field of architecture is that of the loss of the figure ground. This loss has been attributed as one the great failings of modernism. Christian Norberg-Schultz argues that after the Second World War a transformation occurred in the built environment in terms of 'space' and 'character'. For example, spatially, less consideration was given in new settlements in regards to contextually given density and enclosure. Buildings could now be freely laid out in a park-like landscape.[22] Norberg Schulz suggests: "Lost in the settlement of a place in nature, lost are the urban foci as places for common living, lost is the building as a meaningful sub-place where man may simultaneously experience individuality and belonging. Lost is also the relationship to earth and sky. Most modern buildings exist in a 'nowhere', they are not related to a landscape and not to a coherent, urban whole, but live their abstract life in a kind of mathematical-technological space which hardly distinguishes between up and down."[23] Thus, the modernist anti-historicism and rhetoric of reinvention interrupted the native morphology and image of any given city. In response to this, many post-modern architects have decided to deny the material fact of the city altogether. "Instead, conceiving it as a subject, to be thought about theoretically and against which self-proclaiming, autonomous objects can be positioned, seemingly at will"[24].

If one considers the environment as able to influence humans daily lives, an alternative premise is necessary. There is a need to understand the ever diverse needs, emotions and experiences of those who inhabit a place. By understanding the architectural design practice as a process without any right outcome we move beyond ideological modes of thinking. Introducing a, perhaps, negotiative architecture which can be relevant to the people of communities of any given metropolis at a specific moment in time. This can only be done, by transcending these purely rational design thinking and shifting towards a design approach which does not act on an object, but acts on experience. Foregoing the solely objective aspects of architecture and leaning into its subjective-ness is essential for any designer that wishes to add value through architecture to those who inhabit a place. Through this lens, literary methods provide tools for a designer to inquire into the more elusive social and psychological aspects of architecture. As such, they focus on difference and not identity. Moving towards an architecture that is forever becoming and exists beyond binaries, as to foster a truly intimate city, in all its possible manifestations.

[1]   David Wang and Linda Groat, *Architectural Research Methods,* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), p.10

[2]   Nigel Cross*, Designerly Ways of Knowing,* (Basel, Birkhauser-Verlag AG, 2007)

[3]   Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner,* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 76-104

[4]   Mark Pimlott, *Msc 3|4 Interiors, Buildings, Cities study manual,* (Delft University of Technology, 2018), p.2

[5]   David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer, *Dwelling, Place and Environment; Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World* (Dordrecht Martinus Nlijhoff Publishers, 1985)

[6]   Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2010)

[7]   Klaske Havik, 'Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto', Delft University of Technology, Volume 4, 2017

[8]   Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Lived Space, Embodied Experience and Sensory Thought', *Oase*, 2001

[9]   Havik, p. 43

[10]   Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Domicile in Words The Scriptive Approach to Architecture', in *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture*, (Rotterdam: NAI010 Publishers, 2014), p. 7

[11]   Alberto Pérez-Gomez, 'Language, Literary Approaches and Architectural Meaning', in *Writingplace: investigations in Architecture and Literature,* (Rotterdam: NAI010 Publishers, 2016).

[12]   Pallasmaa p. 7

[13]   John V. Maciuika, 'Adolf Loos and the Aphoristic Style: Rhetorical Practice in Early Twentieth-Century Design Criticism', *Design Issues,* Vol. 16, pp. 75-86

[14]   Pallasmaa p. 8

[15]   Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2010)

[16]   Martin Heidegger, 'Bouwen Wonen Denken', in *'Dat is Architectuur' Sleutelteksten uit de twintigste eeuw,* (Rotterdam: NAI010 publishers, 2009).

[17]   Peter Zumthor, Maureen Oberli-Turner, and Catherine Schelbert. *Thinking Architecture*, (Basel: Birkhauser, 2006), p. 85-86

[18]   Havik, p. 43

[19]   Sanford Kwinter*, 'Neuroecology: Notes Toward a Synthesis', in *The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism: Part Two,* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2013)

[20]   Will Wittig, 'The Art of Architecture as Mediating Vessel', in *The Art of Architecture/The Science of Architecture,* (Detroit), pp. 578-583

[21]   Will Wittig, p. 580

[22]   Reza Shirazi, *Towards an Articulated Phenomenological Interpretation of Architecture,* (New York: 2014)

[23]   Christian Norberg Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology in Architecture,* (New York, 1980), p. 190

[24]   Daniel Rosbottom, *Interiors Buildings Cities: City Rooms Brief,* (Delft University of Technology, 2018)

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