

Reflection Report

Learning From Amateurs

How Madrid Balcony Appropriations Can Instruct Architects

Mary Elizabeth Perez

Student ID: 5771595

Architectural Design Crossovers Graduation Studio

Delft University of Technology, 2023 – 2024

Mentors

Agnes van der Meij - Design Mentor

Freek Speksnijder - Building Technology Mentor

Joran Kuijper - Research Mentor

Planning, Process, and Product

Reflection on the planning, process, and product of the preliminary research results. Argumentation preceding the research (study plan). What is the method used. How is the research applied to the design process and proposed project.

My research on balcony appropriations in Madrid originates from my interest in individual interactions and modifications with space and the role that architecture and the built environment plays in encouraging this behavior. Considering that these interests cater to a very individualist and case-by-case scenario subject, I integrated a research method that quantifies and categorizes these individualistic and unique behaviors in an organized, rational, and procedural way. My design process begins with an analytical process that analyzes the photographs I took during my Madrid site visit and highlights the moments in the user appropriation that define its main purpose and appropriative intention. These modified photographs are curated in *The Catalogue of Balcony Appropriations* featuring an amalgam of 62 of the most unique and representative appropriations of Madrid balconies. Each image is individually analyzed to understand the actor's (the resident's) appropriative intention and methods of interaction. Each photograph has a highlighted figure (represented in one of seven distinct colors) that relates to its most representing and catering appropriative need – where in some cases overlap needs.

The *Learning from Amateurs* research paper integrates methods of analysis, photography, interview, and application. Photography plays an integral role in my on-site research to record the balcony appropriations. Photography is the core analytical tool in *The Catalogue of Appropriations* to organize my findings and compare, contrast, dissect, and analyze the balcony appropriations and the user's intention and make-shift approach. This process results in revealing unforeseen patterns, especially regarding its implications on social or public issues influencing individual private responses – especially through the lens of privacy and security. Many of these revealing uses were uncovered via a series of planned and impromptu interviews with six Lavapiés locals and utilized questions integrating Participatory Action Research (Lewin) strategies. Interviews with locals supplied me with the most authentic insight of local's perception translated into action. Though very tedious, this analytical process was crucial for me to perspectivize the user and understand the research gathered from my interviews and anthropological understanding of perception to interaction. This process was pivotal in my conception and proposal of my housing design's core element: the appropriative brick. The proposal of the appropriative brick emphasizes the concept of “detail to built-up” space and how the structural component of a house, such as a brick, can play a large role in the way that people use the built environment to serve them.

This research and process resulted in seven main appropriative qualities that are most common throughout Madrid which are: spatial limitation, productivity, leisure, climate, privacy, security, and community engagement. Defining the seven main appropriative reasons provided the foundational understanding to make larger general conclusions that connect these seven spatial qualities to cater to a wider general application. These four overarching conclusions are: existing conditions disregard needs and desires, programs are interchangeably indoor and outdoor, necessity to modify or adjust architectural features, and shared appropriation thrives with limited access. These overarching conclusions are essentially an “analysis of an analysis” and provided guidance and a framework for me to follow when I was designing the housing project's massing and overall flow of the apartment. Whereas these four overarching conclusions influenced the conceptualization of indoor and outdoor fluid units with courtyards and voids, the seven spatial qualities influenced the multi-functional design of the appropriative brick and its integral role in the design of the apartment building.

Results and Improvements

Was the approach successful. Why do I think it was successful or not. In what ways did it work or not work. How could the process have been improved. How did I translate the feedback into my work. How I learned from my work.

Reflecting on this project, I consider my approach to be successful but my planning to lack efficiency. Since the project's inception, I knew that photography would be the main method used and would play an integral role in recording and analyzing the user interaction with the built environment. In fact, my MSc2 research paper *Extrospective Design* dissected the architect and client disconnect and explored the potential of integrating approaches used by method actors to understand their characters via the analysis of a case study. Since then, I have been fascinated by applying methods of empathy and an anthropomorphic research lens to the architectural design process. The referenced "methods of empathy" are observations, analyzed observations, and interviews. The observation and analytical process is exercised in *The Catalogue of Balcony Appropriations* and supplies an on-site dissection while the interviews provide the insight needed to understand the user's point of view and their appropriative intentions. Considering how fruitful these six interviews were, I believe that if I had organized my Madrid site visit more efficiently, I would have had more interviews and therefore been provided with more perspectives to supply my photographic analytical process. Overall, I feel that the information gathering stage was quite successful and set a strong basis for my analysis and design development phase.

The analysis phase of my project, mainly defined by writing the research paper and compiling *The Catalogue of Balcony Appropriations*, was tedious yet effective. My decision to completely dissect and edit 62 photographs took much of my time and delayed my design time. This ambitious analytical task was due to my inability to be realistic with my time frame and made it a stressful period to finish everything within the timeframe. Though the essay writing process took longer than expected, I feel very confident with the seven spatial qualities and four overarching conclusions deducted. These form the concrete points that supply formal analysis and transform a subjective topic like 'spatial appropriation' into an organized research method that quantifies and categorizes these individualistic and unique behaviors. Though very time consuming and limited my allocated time for the design, I feel satisfied with the results and taking the time to go through and properly analyze each image provided me a thorough understanding and foundation to guide my design process.

I feel the most difficult part was getting into the flow of working between research, design, and structure. Reflecting on the design process, I value the simultaneous merging of all three project components to craft an effective design solution. Though it was difficult for me to balance all three, this "dance" as my mentors referred to it as, has taught me a lot about the design process and how components inform and strengthen the other. Working on "all three fronts" however made it difficult for me to efficiently plan and estimate time allowance and often led to me under-presenting at desk crits and having a difficult time expressing my concept. Often, this process felt very overwhelming trying to juggle research, design, and structure and coming prepared to class for each component. For instance, there was a point I was so focused on the structure that I overlooked it's relation to the design and meaning of the project. However, as soon as I solidified the design goals and key components, the "dance" between the elements become much smoother and I found it easier to schedule and plan dedicated days for specific parts of the project. Unfortunately, this realization came much later than I hoped. However, I learned a lot about how I work and the most efficient order of operations I need to follow to achieve my most efficient design process.

Looking Forward: This Project and My Architectural Ambitions

How this project's process and product have evolved and contributed to my architectural ambitions.

1. *What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (A, U, BT, LA, MBE), and your master program (MSc AUBS)?*

The Architectural Design Crossover graduation studio encourages exploration of our passions via the lens of urban commons and strategies. Among these, I gravitated toward the concept of mobility and was interested in analyzing it at the scale of an individual within the community and the built environment's role in shaping spaces to allow locals to live authentically and interact with their surroundings to suit their immediate needs. This concept of 'living authentically' has appeared throughout my architecture career as I have carried an enthusiasm for user-centric design – with a specific attentiveness to how detail-oriented architecture can play an integral role in how the space effects the individual. This studio's emphasis on integrating methods and theories from various fields encourages me to explore more 'unconventional paths' within the category of mobility and pursue my interest in user-centric architecture and its effect on the individual and community within the apartment building, the neighbourhood (Lavapiés), and the city (Madrid). My long-time fascination for user spatial appropriation took the forefront of my research and project proposal. This playful topic allows me to explore the instinctual, creative side that all building habitants have and address the topic at a personal and intimate level yet propose a project that can be expanded and applied to a general audience.

The *Learning from Amateurs* research paper dissects the user and architect relationship integrating a developed multi-disciplinary methodology that further analyzes the themes by blending theory and anthropological understanding to a practical sense. This studio's research driven structure encourages and challenges me to develop a grounded and cognizant project for a multi-factor qualitative topic, such as spatial appropriations, to create a suitable and research supportive design intervention. Moreover, this research applies to the Master of Architecture track as it provides me with a deeper understanding of the field and dynamics of the actors in the field I am re-entering. Understanding user's spatial appropriations is preparing me for my career where I am designing for a client. This research and methodology explore the playful and experimental potential that methods of analysis can bring to the design process and I aspire to carry with me into my career.

2. *How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?*

Above all things, this graduation year taught me the most about the "dance" merging research, design, and structure and can be evident throughout my design process. Working on the research paper throughout the design process allowed me to constantly reflect on my research and keep the spirit of my project present even when making design choices. For instance in the design process, I at times found

myself getting carried away by the structural choices that deviate from the meaning in my research. Moreover, when designing, I noticed portions of my research that were no longer relevant or important to the story I am designing and then was necessary for me to re-understand my research to go back to the cohesive story.

3. *How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?*

The *Learning from Amateurs* methodology and theoretical framework is derived from an amalgam of influences within architecture and across the fields of social philosophy, psychology, and anthropology. I present acclaimed sources from these fields throughout my research paper's six domains: defining needs and desires, methods of appropriation, theorizing the user and architect disconnect, balconies as a frame of reference, seven conclusions, and four overarching themes. Some of the methods and theories present include the Actor Network Theory, John Dewey Theory, Theory of Affordances (with references to Herman Herzberger), as well as some psychology studies for understanding user-spatial interaction. Moreover, this paper's research is exercised and applied to practice through *The Catalogue of Balcony Appropriations* and draws conclusions through this investigative application of the proposed theory and methodology.

Learning from Amateurs utilizes the methods of analysis, photography, interview, and reproduction. Photography plays an integral role in my on-site research to record the balcony appropriations. Photography becomes the core analytical tool in *The Catalogue of Balcony Appropriations* to organize my findings and compare, contrast, dissect, and analyze the balcony appropriations and the user's intention and make-shift approach. This process results in revealing unforeseen patterns, especially regarding its implications on social or public issues influencing individual private responses - especially through the lens of privacy and security. My research paper features selected images from the catalogue to support my analysis and conclusions. Besides photography, I conducted a series of planned and impromptu interviews with six Lavapies locals and utilized questions integrating Participatory Action Research (Lewin) strategies.

Maria Jose (*Lavapies local and has lived in her Corrala apartment for over sixty years*)

Paul (*Lavapies local and has lived in the same Corrala as Maria for four years*)

Ana (*Corrala Museum Curator*)

Shira (*American expat living in a Lavapies flat for the past five years*)

Dani (*tattoo artist who tattoos from his flat's living room in Lavapies*)

Pablo (*Lives in the Entrepatrios Cooperative, located slightly south of Lavapies*)

I had the opportunity to tour the homes of Maria, Paul, Shira, and Dani and ask about their balcony and gallery appropriations (as well as some interior interventions) and what these 'make-shift adaptations' mean to them. Combining the information and perspective gained from the interviews with the photographic analysis and site research forms a contextual understanding that lays the groundwork for the design development phase. This research is then applied via a balcony and gallery architectural feature analysis matrix (Figure 43 and 44 in the research paper) that

highlights the architecture feature, how users typically modify it, and what components of it are useful for users. Dedicating the initial stages of the design development phase to understanding the balcony's role, its relationship to the surrounding environment, and its functionality provided me with the framework to guide the housing proposal.

4. *How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?*

Prior to conducting my on-site investigation, I was not anticipating the research to reveal how social issues facing the neighborhood are embedded and reflected through the user's spatial adjustments. The research's conclusions broadened my perspective on how architecture is one of the ways they cope with these issues. A metropolitan city like Madrid hosts a multitude of social, cultural, and political dynamics that my site-research revealed are reflected in the local balcony appropriations and user interviews. Designers carry the responsibility of crafting buildings that work congruently with people and allow users to authentically shape their private or shared spaces to reflect needs. I believe designers should more often turn to user's informal interventions to meet the current and emerging societal demands to result in user-catered projects.

5. *How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?*

The research I conducted on Madrid balcony appropriations can be applied to future research, particularly the report and conclusions made in the seven spatial qualities and the four overarching appropriative conclusions. The seven spatial qualities are particularly fruitful considering the neighborhood's dense and dynamic appropriative community shaped by high exposure to others' actions. Through this assessment, four overarching conclusions emerge encompassing the reasons for spatial appropriation in Lavapiés. The following four conclusions form an analytical framework applicable beyond Lavapiés to other cities. Though some observations are Madrid-specific, such as its climate and social context, the uncovered motives represent universal human responses to common trends.

In regard to transferability from academia to my career, my research paper's theorization of the architect and user disconnect (at a surface and inner level) provided me essential insight into an issue that has originated since the inception of the profession. I feel it is especially important for me to understand as a young professional about to re-enter the field. I have strived to create user-centric projects throughout my architecture school projects and I aspire to continue doing so throughout my career – whether that be at an architecture office or a practice of my own.

Personal Reflection Questions

Two questions that I find most relevant to my project and architectural goals.

1. *How can architecture be disruptive of the user's playful manipulation of existing conditions and how do architects mediate these other factors?*

Analyzing the architect and user disconnect reveals that designers can only anticipate so much of people's needs and desires. Hence, it's not the architect's role to dictate these features, rather, it's up to the users to apply programmatic functions to the space. The architect's challenge is to balance designed and undesigned spaces that account for individual behavior and social customs that can be applied to specific and general contexts. The psychology-based theoretical framework presented in my research paper underscores the significance of incorporating the psyche's spatial perception to perspectivize the future user. My theoretical research points to how spatial appropriations are a testament to what it means to be a human inhabiting architecture - the purest form of creative self-expression within the built environment. Spatial appropriations, particularly in housing, reflect our innate needs to personalize and are a glimpse of our ideal living conditions. Meaning it is vital the architecture remains the balance between designed and undesigned spaces that can morph to the needs of the resident, all the while being definitive of its spatial intentions. Exploring architecture as a lifestyle tool that enhances living quality emphasizes the building's role as a living, ever-changing tool for its users that evolves purpose through generational application. This appropriative domino effect establishes the foundation for future generations to develop and discover new needs and desires by maximizing their living spaces. Fostering spaces that optimize personalization can streamline the programmatic evolution process for future generations.

2. *How will I be able to implement this project's research and personalized design process into the real world (post-graduation working at an office)?*

People will continue to appropriate so architecture should adapt and evolve alongside its residents. My research points to the substantial impact of memory and experience on an architect's design decisions, therefore I conclude the significance of incorporating a narrative-driven design approach to cater to the human scale. Observing behavior, particularly informal actions like spatial appropriations, is an often-overlooked tool for generating authentic, accessible, and effective solutions. Moreover, conversations with locals can reveal hidden stories behind certain interventions that may not have been apparent otherwise. Therefore, as a future architect, I strive to gather as many stories, observe behavior as much as possible, and draw from sources beyond architecture to enrich my internal library of perspectives. Moreover, my research paper theorizes the architect and user disconnect (at a surface and inner level) to better understand the core of this issue. This is a topic that has originated since the profession's origin and is something that I feel is important to grasp as a young professional about to re-enter the field. Crafting user-centric projects is a theme throughout my projects in architecture school, and I aspire to continue doing so throughout my career - whether that be at an architecture office or a practice of my own.