

COMPARATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

As a Way to Understand Context

Student

Haoyuan Du (4949439)

Chair of Public Building, "Public Condenser"

Thesis "Lift the Heart of Morgenstond"

COMPARATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

I INTRODUCTION

Research-methodology does have a strong connection with architectural profession, heuristic techniques, and design practices. I did not realize that before I listened to these lectures. For a long time, since architecture does not like those basic research, such as physics and biology, which have clear research-methodology and stand on a solid theoretical ground made up of formula, theorem and experiments, I thought architecture is a field based solely on practices and experience. Being engaged with these lectures that focus on various aspects of architectural discourse, I found that architecture sits at the intersection of different fields, like praxeology, typology, anthropology etc, which somehow blurs its boundary but provides us the opportunity to discover connections between these fields. In this way, architecture as a subject not only be explained by certain methodology but also exerts influence on it. Within this interconnection, architecture is no longer a research object alone, it becomes the hub and catalyst of related subjects. The numerous possibilities of this interdisciplinary approach encourage researchers to discover new fields themselves, leading to a heuristic process. What's more, by referring to research-methodology, we can empower our design practices with logic and vision. In return, the outcome of the design process will reflect on the methodology in more than one way.

Among these lectures, what impressed me most is Gorny's talk on typologies. The reason why his lecture caught my interest is not only his well-prepared content but also the way he presented it. During the clarifications of concepts, he used comparative research to distinguish some confusing terms, including type, typology, the model, morphology, taxonomy and topology. In order to clarify them better, he projected two separate slides on left and right screens with different terms and their definition, making it extremely understandable to us. Gorny is the only one I have ever met who makes the most of this two screens instead of simply copying one screen from the other, which is reminiscent of his comparative research approach.

Comparative research, as a research methodology that arose in Greece in the 6th century¹, is the most common one within its category. However, it never fades or being abandoned for thousands of years. Does it still work in complicated context nowadays? I decided to implement it in my thesis research.

Since my studio's topic is public condenser, the project's main object would be improving social coherence. Based on the design project and the excursion to the site of the Hague, what interest me are the multiplicity concept to which the project pertains and the multicultural background that is contributed by different ethnic groups living there. In order to get a better understanding of such complicated context during design process and achieve design project's goal, it is crucial to know similarities and differences between distinguished cultures by conducting comparative research and to explain the reasons behind them. For this specific topic, I choose writing systems of different languages that belong to site's multicultural backdrop as my starting point, trying to figure it out from a semiotic point of view.

II COMPARATIVE RESEARCH IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

For the purpose of achieving above goal, I will research the characteristics and semiotic meaning of various languages' writing systems, then I will compare different languages' writing systems in several ways, for instance, how each block or part makes up a letter or word and how these letters or words are written. I will also trace the development of a certain writing system chronologically, does it become simplified or complicated, why such change happened and what consequence does it have on the way that people perceive and change the world?

During my study, I will mainly implement comparative research. When it comes to this topic, the first question to ask is how to define comparative research, and how it differs from any other type of research. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, research means serious study of a subject, in order to discover new facts or test new ideas². Compared to other synonyms, like 'work', 'study' or 'experiment', research is the careful detailed work that is done in order to find out more about a subject, especially as a part of a scientific or academic project. So it has to comply with rigid requirements related to academic discourse. For comparative research, as a sub-type that constitutes the research sphere, it must meet two conditions: first, data must be gathered on two or more cases. The cases may be countries, cities, firms or families - the nature of the unit is irrelevant;

COMPARATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

second, there must be an attempt to explain rather than only to describe. If only the first condition is met, data is presented without explanation, which is not the same as research. So the term comparative research is used only when both the above conditions are met.

There are several methods of doing comparative research and Tilly distinguishes four types of comparative research namely: individualizing, universalizing, variation-finding and encompassing³. My research method belongs to encompassing comparison, which 'places different instances at various locations within the same system, on the way to explaining their characteristics as a function of their varying relationships to the system as a whole'.

The reason I choose this approach is that through the comparative research of various writing systems and placing them within the same analytical framework, we may approach to the mindsets of individuals who come from both western and eastern world, the mindsets that are deeply rooted in cultural genes and may not be realized by themselves.

It seems that my research refers to Havik's point that language as a threshold of architectural research, because writing is the representation of language. However, writing system is the reflection of people's identity and cultural background, which may influence on their behavior. I take writing system as indirect factor of human action and conduct, so my research would be more related to praxeology in this way.

There are some problems of doing comparative research. Among those, cultural explanation would be the biggest challenge, because my research is mainly about people's mindsets affected by different cultural background. Thus the challenge becomes the motivation of my research, and I hope the outcome will help deal with this problem.

III HISTORY AND PROBLEMS IN ADOPTING COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

We have been adopting comparative research for over 2000 years. Lots of influential thinkers and social science founders implemented the comparative method in their groundbreaking work. By tracking the development of comparative research and locating turning point of such methodology under the changing context, this paper tries to help us get a better understanding of the reasons behind ever changing trend.

The using of comparative research dates back to ancient Greece when Aristotle and his followers analyzed the constitutions of more than 150 Greek towns to determine which political organization was the optimal model and explained the reasons for it. The high esteem for intellectual activity gave rise to a genuine curiosity about other cultures, which has lain at the heart of comparative inquiry. About 2000 years later, French political philosopher and sociologist Montesquieu first investigated French customs from the perspective of a cultural outsider. He then turned to explore different forms of government, institutions and the legal agencies, categorizing them according to several factors, like value systems, climate, population and religion⁴. All these effort lay the foundations for comparative research.

From the 19th century, comparative research were developed within social sciences and other humanities including anthropology, psychology, sociology, history, economics, political science, linguistics, law, education, religion and human geography. Some famous scholar, such as German philosopher and sociologist Karl Marx, Max Weber, French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville and French sociologist Émile Durkheim, implemented comparative method to explain certain social phenomena. Among those figures, English philosopher John Stuart Mill is considered to be the pioneer who systematized the comparative method in his research.

The prosperity fell into a decline during two world wars, after that, interest in comparative approaches grew dramatically, especially in the United States. Such development was motivated by the newly created international organizations' data needs. First is the United Nations and its specialized agencies: the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Labour Organization (ILO), and the World Health Organization (WHO). Then the Council of Europe, the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Influenced by social development and equipped by new techniques, researchers had capacity to investigate their topics in a more systematic way.

COMPARATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

After 1980s, the boom of information technology facilitated researchers to process massive data for comparison, and increasing number of international cooperative research programmes encouraged them to exchange their thought internationally. All these factors provide a fresh and global perspective on the way we do comparative research.

From above chronology, we can draw a conclusion that technological innovation and social development are two main driving force of comparative research.

However, every coin has two sides. The globalization enriches the sphere of comparative research, while poses a problem of conceptual equivalence at the same time: the data sets in different cultures may define categories differently or may not use the same categories. In this way, multicultural context creates barriers for further comparison and investigation. Since comparative research is to investigate similarities and differences of several distinguished objects, it is inevitable that we will come across some inconsistency caused by different cultural definitions. The question of whether these differences are more important than the common features of categories is impossible to reply. At least these empirical differences in concepts have to be kept in mind within a broad measure of equivalence. That is to say, we should define crucial aspects first, trying to seek a common ground for comparing all objects and, if it is possible, transforming non-equivalence that can not be reconciled to standpoint of the investigation.

Another problem, cultural explanation, is closely related to conceptual equivalence. We have assumed that comparative research succeed in identifying the causes of the similarities or differences of research objects until now. However, when it comes to a cultural explanation, whether it should be considered as a satisfactory one or not remains controversial. From my perspective, this can not be solved as it is a matter of theoretical debate where different people may put different interpretation on it.

For my research, multicultural society is the context where the comparison situates and the major problem I need to face. Based on the reflection above, when being faced with different writing systems, the first thing is to seek common ground for further comparison, looking for equivalent categories which fit for all objects, including the relationship between language and writing system, the composition of letter or word and the formation of them with specific traditional or modern instruments. All the writing systems I choose can be analyzed within those given categories. The essential difference between phonogram (like Latin alphabet) and logogram (like Chinese characters) will be considered as distinctive ways of representation instead of different categories that confuse researchers.

IV TOWARDS A SOCIAL DESIGN

Based on the findings I discovered, architecture is not only about design practice or other empirical process, but also relates to intangible context and research-methodology which influence imperceptibly architectural sphere. The connection between context, research and design is complicated. Context, as the backdrop of both research and design, exerts influence in a unnoticed way. If we ignore context during research or design process, we leave one of the most crucial factors, which may leads to an opposite outcome that has no meaning to current situation or future. Since contextual influence is intangible, it is hard for us to discover a direct connection between context and other realms. We need a medium which can bridge that gap. After the lectures we had, it turns out that praxeology can take on that role. As a study of human action, praxeology investigates human's reaction to environments and other people. Such reaction relates to human's nature which is determined by their genes and mindsets. While the former is a gift from parents, the latter can be shaped by education and influence of general situation, both of which are part of context. By this way, praxeology links context with human who is also the most common object of research and design.

Some scholar argued that the rejection of positivism and empiricism in the development of praxeology theories challenge its authority⁵. From the dialectical point of view, as scientific methods, positivism and empiricism do have cons which praxeology has already realized. The contradiction between praxeology' s main object (human) and scientific methods is apparent, which makes it difficult to negotiate, and the logical positivism cannot predict or explain human action. When we deal with

COMPARATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

such problem, the most important tip we need to remember is the uncertainty of human beings: we are easy to be nudged but hard to be pushed.

So when it comes to the architectural discourse and the design of public building, the uncertainty of human beings makes it impossible to ensure that there must be certain action/activity within specific area of projects. The only effort architects can make is to increase the possibility that some space is used in a certain way. Whether it works or not depends on how much they understand locals and context and what kind of the research method they employ to interpret those information during the design process.

For me, understanding the context is as crucial as choosing a proper research method(ology). The design ambition to improve social coherence is not impossible only if you go in a favourable direction (starting with context) and using the right apparatus (comparative research).

- ¹ En.wikipedia.org. (2019). Comparative research. [online] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparative_research [Accessed 12 Dec. 2019].
- ² "Research | Meaning Of Research In Longman Dictionary Of Contemporary English | LDOCE". 2019. Ldoceonline.Com. <https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/research>.
- ³ Pickvance, Christopher G. "Four varieties of comparative analysis." *Journal of housing and the built environment* 16, no. 1 (2001): 7-28.
- ⁴ Hantrais, Linda. *International comparative research: Theory, methods and practice*. Macmillan International Higher Education, 2008.
- ⁵ Mayer, Thomas. "Boettke's Austrian critique of mainstream economics: An empiricist's response." *Critical Review* 12, no. 1-2 (1998): 151-171.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brislin, Richard W. "Comparative research methodology: Cross-cultural studies." *International journal of psychology* 11, no. 3 (1976): 215-229.
- Heidenheimer, Arnold J., Hugh Hecl, and Carolyn Teich Adams. *Comparative public policy: The politics of social choice in America, Europe, and Japan*. St. Martin's Press, 1990.
- Pickvance, Christopher G. "Four varieties of comparative analysis." *Journal of housing and the built environment* 16, no. 1 (2001): 7-28.
- Van de Vijver, Fons, and Kwok Leung. *Methods and data analysis of comparative research*. Allyn & Bacon, 1997.
- Hantrais, Linda. *International comparative research: Theory, methods and practice*. Macmillan International Higher Education, 2008.
- Daniels, Peter T., and William Bright, eds. *The world's writing systems*. Oxford University Press on Demand, 1996.
- Harris, Roy. *The origin of writing*. London: Duckworth, 1986.