

# QUESTIONING THE LANDSCAPE

## Landscape as a Concrete Abstraction

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## I INTRODUCTION

Being aware of and reflecting on the methods you employ to conduct research, is in the architectural field more than accounting to your peers for the way in which the research has produced knowledge. Since generally the research informs the design, or poses a wicked problem to be resolved, the methods and the design of the research structure itself plays a fundamental role in the outcome of the research and design project. This is especially true since, as Rittel and Webber state, the formulation of the wicked problem *is* the solution.<sup>1</sup> The course provided useful entry points into a range of methodologies and positions, and critical takes on well-established notions that I otherwise would have taken for granted. Particularly interesting to my own project was the lecture by F.L. Hooimeijer, her doctoral research<sup>2</sup> on the polder city and the writings on the topic of territory. Since the site was an example of territorial engineering on a macro-scale, applying i.e. the concept of ‘constructed ground’<sup>3</sup> on the man-made nature produced by machines in the Flevopolder was particularly fruitful. The lecture on urban literacy by Klaske Havik played a more practical role, as I employed writing combined with photos to describe a journey through the project site which led to a realization of sorts. Since I am graduating in the Independent Group Studio, the topic and parameters of my project have largely been defined by myself. The proposal for a project was generated by an interest in post-war (re)construction practices in France, particularly the new town of Cergy-Pontiose portrayed in Eric Rohmers’ movie *L’Ami de mon amie*, and later shifted to the context of the flevopolder and new town Almere. The primary research question has been; In what ways does a new town that was developed top-down by the state, as a means to provide quantities of housing for the projected population growth, and as part of a larger metropolitan network, constitute a place of its own? The tension between space put to use for an abstract purpose, and the material and experienced qualities of space-as-lived was particularly tangible and intriguing in the Flevopolder. Lefebvre’s notion of space as a concrete abstraction, in which the abstract quality of space only becomes visible when it becomes decisive in social practices<sup>4</sup> (real estate market, mass-housing schemes), and De Certeau’s spatial strategies and tactics<sup>5</sup> became elemental in framing and supporting the research question. This interest in the phenomenology and subjective experience in a place that is a crystallization of abstract needs, provided an interesting take on the theme of *Intimate City*, by placing it in a modernistic (sub)urban context instead of a historical European city center, while at the same time acknowledging the urbanization, or interiorization of the territory.

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<sup>1</sup> Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences*, no. 4 (n.d.): 155–69. p.161.

<sup>2</sup> Hooijmeijer Fransje, “The Tradition of Making Polder Cities” (TU Delft, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> F.L Hooimeijer, F. Lafleur, and T.T. Trinh, “Drawing the Subsurface: An Integrative Design Approach,” *Procedia Engineering*, no. 209 (2017): 61–74. p. 63

<sup>4</sup> Lukasz Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory* / Lukasz Stanek (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). p. 144.

<sup>5</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. 1: ..., 2. print (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2013). p. 35-38.

## II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Since the Independent Group studio requires participant to develop their research thesis, theme and location for the project, the first part of the research was developed as a set of terms that frame the project within a context, theoretical background and method, to enable further development towards a design. The approach is primarily context-driven, since the research was sparked by an interest in the character and phenomenological experience of urban spaces produced by technocratic welfare states. Since these spaces obviously have a strong political and ideological heritage, a critical investigation into the history of post-war urbanism and architecture, with a particular focus on the members of Team 10, and critical theory on space and territory developed as a reaction to the space produced in the post-war era, was deemed necessary to provide the theoretical framework.

Another component to my research has been a visual survey of the city through photography and film and analytic writing, which was essential in reading the city and documenting my own findings and experiences in the field. The different media used in the field work each have their own particularities, and heuristic aspects that enabled me to gain understanding of the context. The photographs were useful in providing a visual survey of the whole city, the short film was particularly well suited to show or speculate on relations between different sites, and the writing helped me to synthesize a ‘problem’ out of an particular journey that has laid the groundwork for a design program. This research in the field was done from a more emic and subjective point of view, although I still considered myself an outsider as direct involvement with local residents or actors did not play a major role. In addition to this, I also searched through the extensive collections held in the archives of Flevoland and Almere, to gather source material that enabled me to construct a narrative about the place. The research done was qualitative in nature, since I was interested in the experiential quality of the place. The research is largely positioned within the naturalistic paradigm according to Groat and Wang<sup>6</sup>, since it is not aimed at proving a certain hypothesis, but rather a description or problem statement of a certain context. Following Lucas’ model <sup>7</sup>, the context of Almere has been studied initially as a type, within an international discourse on urbanism and planning that took place across western nations in the post-war era, and in a tradition of building new towns that continues to this day in for example China, Kenya and other non-western nations. This study was however not a historical analysis or chronological summary of architectural discourse, but rather a collection of fragments across different disciplines and practices, all related to the ideological, political, philosophical, social and architectural context of new towns. Using this model for the literature review which does not attempt to circumscribe a ‘whole’ but entertains the notion of an ‘open’ whole, with a flexible boundary that enables a transdisciplinary approach.

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Andreas Sattrup, “Architectural Research Paradigms” (Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts School of Architecture, n.d.). p.6.

<sup>7</sup> Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016). p. 12.

### III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

In doing historical research on the technocratic aspects and architectural discourse surrounding the post-war urbanization in (mainly) Western Europe and the United States, the emphasis has been on the relationship between architectural theory, economic and political policies, ideological agenda's and cultural norms on notions such as the town, the neighborhood and the home. The inherent structure to the research was the valley section model by Geddes, which I initially came across in the work of Team 10. I found this model particularly interesting since it provided a model for architecture and urbanism that was founded on a relation to the material conditions of the landscape and its modes of production, and the different scales of the house, village, city, metropole and cosmos. In my opinion, the great promise the model seemed to hold was that it combined or provide opportunity for oscillating between a concrete, material condition (the different ways the land was cultivated) and the (economic) relationships between the different hamlets, villages and cities, similar to Lefebvre's conception of space as a concrete abstraction. This is also, I believe, the 'hard core' of my research program <sup>8</sup>, the logic behind the research I have conducted. It is to a degree comparable to Tafuri's conception of architecture and architectural history as being produces by a broad spectrum of forces and processes, of which the build environment is a product.<sup>9</sup> In the historical research, the production of theory itself is also included, as it grounds the abstract theory in a real condition that has influenced the rhetoric of the theorist. An example of this is the role studies undertaken by ISU on the conditions of dwelling in collective housing estates and suburban houses in France, which generated the Lefebvre's concepts of dominated space and appropriated space.

Analyzing the landscape or city through the lens of a camera has an extensive and rather interesting history. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century the promise of the photograph to produces pure scientific documents seemed unlimited, by capturing the world in the 'universal language of mathematics'.<sup>10</sup> This conception of photography yielding a higher truth is naturally dated. It does, however, produce awareness of places and events in a single language that is readable by anyone, as Susan Sontag writes in her critique on war photography.<sup>11</sup> Nadar is one of the earliest examples of photography put to use as an analytical tool for architecture, producing knowledge about the hitherto unseen and unknown Parisian sewers.<sup>12</sup> In my own research process, the work of photographers such as Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Frank Gohlke and others, who were featured together in the exhibition *New Topographers: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* in 1975, was influential. While taking cues from the Great Surveys in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>13</sup>, the New Topographers documented the suburban sprawl and car dominated landscapes of the United States. In doing this, they spatialized a cultural critique mass culture and the dream world of consumption, raising questions about citizenship and environmental responsibility.<sup>14</sup> Through their works which were largely serial in nature, the landscape was no longer viewed from a 'Best General View', but from an subjective and embodied point of view. Another more recent example is Patrick Keiller,

<sup>8</sup> Stanford Anderson, "Rational Reconstructions and Architectural Knowledge," in *Architecture in the Age of Empire* (Verl. der Bauhaus-Univ, 2011). p. 164.

<sup>9</sup> Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture*. p. 127/

<sup>10</sup> Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3–64. p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, N.Y: Picador, 2003). p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Gandy, "The Paris Sewers and the Rationalization of Urban Space," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 1 (n.d.): 23–44. p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, eds., *Reframing the New Topographics*, 1st ed (Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago : Distributed by the University of Chicago Press, 2010). p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Foster-Rice and Rohrbach. p. 16.

whose films use a similar dead-pan aesthetic with a narration describing a scholar named Robinson undertaking a journey to address ‘the problem of London.’ The problem of London is never made explicit, since the problems are not separable from the landscapes to which they are attached. In developing an aesthetic of my own through which I have framed the territory of Almere, a problem statement or question could be developed that might lead to a design solution. Using writing about a place or experience as a tool was another approach I have taken, with Robert Smithson’s text *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, as an important precedence, since he frames his ponderings about relationships between time, place and memory within his subjective experience wandering about town<sup>15</sup>.

#### IV POSITIONING

Since the research interest of my thesis is context driven, and analyzed on the scale of the territory, I positioned myself as a researcher of a landscape, and territorial condition, that was itself the product of specific political, economic and ideological forces. I made the decision to work from a set of conditions and systems, natural and man-made, virtual and real, to a reading of the context, and a problem statement that would lead to program for an architectural object, rather than start with the object itself. In this, I find myself taking a similar position as that of Hooimeier, which while it is rather technical, has three major components; firstly, it deems a transdisciplinary approach necessary in the design process, focusing on ‘how things work’, integrating scales and concepts, and secondly, it emphasizes that the role of architectural representation in research creates an essential understanding of a condition, and finally it makes little distinction between natural and human-induced processes. While I acknowledge and am aware the benefits of other positions and research methods, such as the poetic position of literary writings on architecture, and anthropological studies of daily life in architectural spaces, my research ‘problem’ seemed first and foremost to be located in the landscape itself.

While on the one hand acknowledging the strengths of positioning oneself as a researcher of systems and processes that take place on a territory, I am concerned about the lived experience of the outcomes of this research program. Thinking and conceptualizing systematically is one the one hand a way out of an object or image orientated approach to architecture, and result in ecologically and functionally sound designs, but an over rationalistic and positivist attitude towards system design can and has resulted in monotonous spaces with little room for human intervention or appropriation. In the research and design done by for example the members of Team 10, the structuralist or systematic approach to the design was complemented or generated by a fascination with vernacular architecture and the banality of daily-life, and the intention of its members was to create an architecture that would leave space for human appropriation.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Smithson and Jack D. Flam, *Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings*, The Documents of Twentieth-Century Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). 68-74.

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